borderline

THE Comics Magazine

December #5

In this issue:

Interview with:
Fabian Nicieza — the conclusion

Features on:
Wertham
Studio Clamp
Roger Langridge
Guy Davis
Ashley Wood
The Norm
Norway
Thunderbolts

Columns · Reviews
News · Views
Small Press

To make your enjoyment of Borderline an even easier experience, follow the simple point and click instructions: All contents have an internal link, allowing you to click on them and be taken automatically to that page. The Globe symbol at the bottom right of each page will take you back to the contents page.

There are also hyperlinks throughout Borderline enabling you to link directly with stories, websites and points of interest on the internet.

B L This symbol means something has finished!

FEATURES & COLUMNS

Industry Standard – Phil Hall's monthly look at what's happening in the industry and his thoughts about it. 3

RaineyWorld: Comics 2040 - DC's answer to Ultimate Fat Marvel. An double-sized holiday season special! 3

Issues - Carol lets rip... Can you say ouch? 15

The Blank Page - Chev talks about a number of things... 16

Continental Drift - Kevin Schomburg takes a closer look at Le Dernier Chant des Malaterre... 17

Learning Curves - Sarah looks at the X-Men, which is having a speculator resurgence. 18

What Is Manga - Kevin Hill tells you about Studio Clamp, the all-girl art group... 19

Man on a Mission - Martin Shipp on "The War Against Terrorism" and "Modern Technology"... 21

Burning Down the Curtain - Rich Johnston looks at the makings of another comics conspiracy! 22

Comics Milestones – Mike Kidson looks at Frederick Wertham's legacy... 23

Comicbook Confidential - "I lost my girl to The Sandman..." 25

The Norm! What is it? Where is it? And is it a success? 26

The Big Interview Concluded! Fabian Nicieza - Part Two of the definitive examination. Phil Hall talks to Fabian, former head of Valiant and former X-Men writer. Here he talks about football, corned beef, music, films, sex appeal, some comics and his Thunderbolts series... 28

Thunderbolts - just what is it about this comic that makes it such a hit with the girls? 35

Libraries - Selina Lock explores a strange world where you can read graphic novels for free... 37

Comics in this Century - a really, really "serious" forecast of the next 97 years in the comics industry. 39

Marquis de Davis – Jay Eales has a brief chat with the Baker Street bloke... 41

Tales of Asgard - Lew (*Combat Colin*) Stringer reports from and on Norway about its massive comics scene! (You know, the one that makes countries like the UK and USA look like two guys in a shed with a photocopier.) 42

The Verdict - Borderline's jury of reviewers - attempting to cover everything from pamphlets to graphic novels to Internet sites. Have they reached the right Verdict? Do you agree with the Borderline Psychotics? Plus *Classic Trade Paperback Review* and *Film Review* of From Hell... 46

Miffy - Terry Wiley and Ady Kermode's dippy brunette in another hilarious strip! 59

Young Guns - Who is Emir Ribeiro? Readers of Velta will be familiar with this Brazilian superhero artist who has worked as a team member of the Deodato Studios. Here's your chance to see a star in the making! 60

Drawing Board - A sneak peek inside the portfolio of Roger Langridge... From *The Goon Show* to *Doctor Who* courtesy of Monty Python and Marcel Marceau! Make a man happy this Christmas, buy Fred the Clown #1 62

World of Heros - Chris and Rebecca have another look at a load of made up hilarity... If you thought the chimps were funny, just wait till you see the marmosets... Bless! 65

Hold the Back Page - your letters! 66

BORDER LINES

POINT AND CLICK CONTENTS

BORDERLINE NEWS

Depleted Uranium Comics - we're all moving and not giving forwarding addresses, we suggest you do the same... 4

Jim Lee - the Image founder and head of WildStorm is back this month... 4

Storming Heaven - Rennie and Irving's new 2000AD strip - it will blow your mind, man... 5

Charity Comic - the latest Kev F Sutherland hair-brained scheme to raise loads of money for good causes! 6

Jimmy Corrigan - one of the most eclectic, brilliant comics of our time is recognised in its nomination for a respected UK book prize. 7

Hedg your Bets - success or failure? Patrick Sherman turns his considerable CGI talents to comics; will his oddly named comic be any good? 8

Dawn of Image! - No not the biography of Image Comics, Joe's joining the crew. Linsner that is... 9

CrossGen - E-Commerce is dead! Maybe not... If nothing else CrossGen will continue to flog life back into dead horses. 10

Marvel round up - we had some nice pictures, we threw some words around them... 11

Popbots - Is that woman taking her underpants off in front of that robot? 12

Tzimtzum - If we knew what it meant we'd explain it in this little box... 13

The Hicks/ Ennis Connection - well... there isn't one, but Garth wrote a sleeve note about the dead comedian... 13

The Ochlocrat – Is this the month of odd sounding, weirdly spelt comic names? Well, a double whammy is in order because this is Gerry Alanguilan's new project from Comics Conspiracy... 14

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THE COMICS MAGAZINE

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Thanks to Paul Annis, Roger Langridge, Dave Campiti, Mike Robinson, Lew Stringer, Yara Maura Silva and Fabian Nicieza (not only does he give good interview, but he's an innovator as well!). Cover design by the near omnipotent Jim Campbell, picture by Thunderbolts' Mark Bagley – Lightning Justice likes Baron Zemo?

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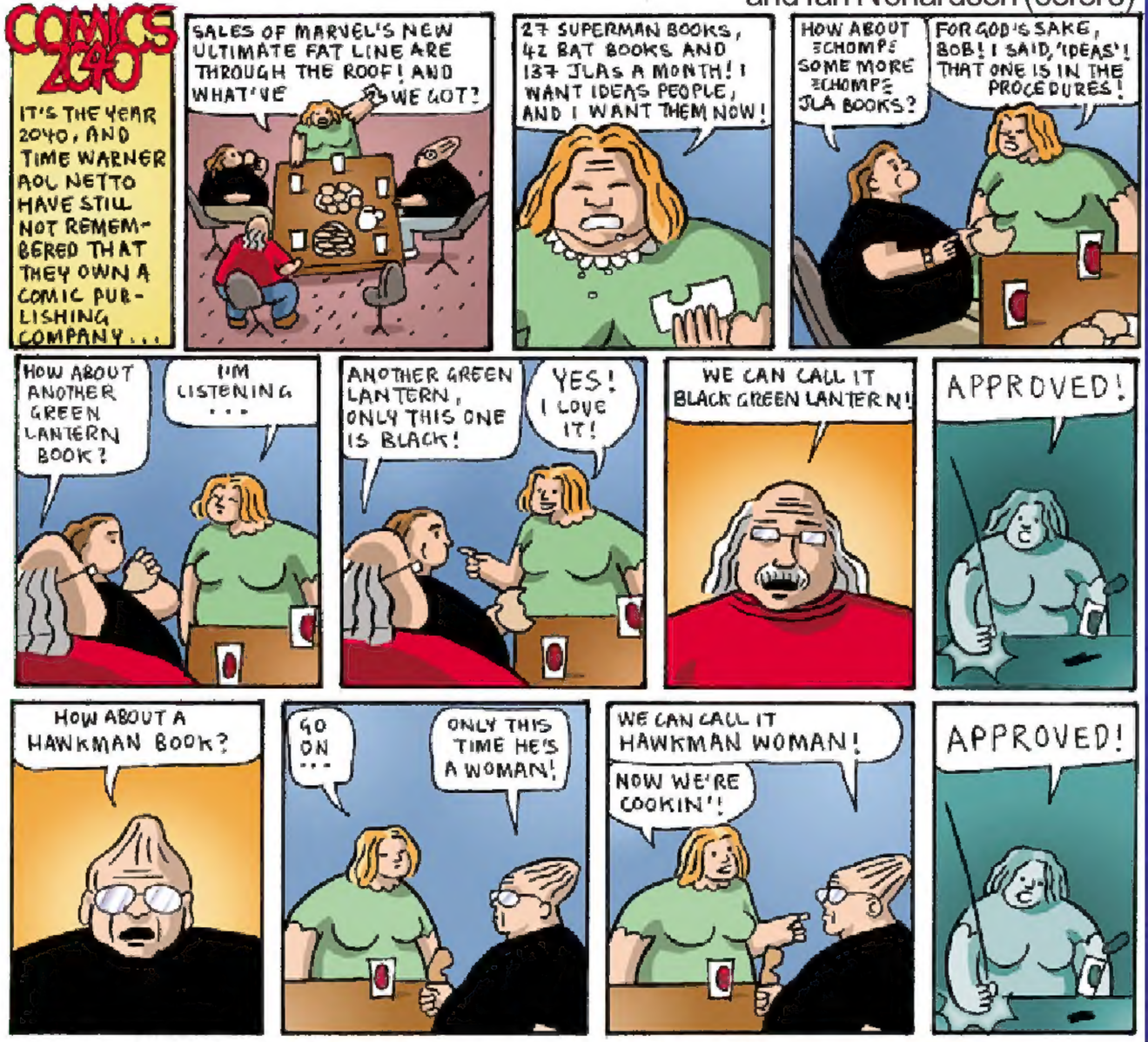
COMICS 2040 by Paul Rainey (art & story) and Ian Richardson (colors)


COMICS 2040
IT'S THE YEAR 2040, AND TIME WARNER AOL NETTO HAVE STILL NOT REMEMBERED THAT THEY OWN A COMIC PUBLISHING COMPANY...
SALES OF MARVEL'S NEW ULTIMATE FAT LINE ARE THROUGH THE ROOF! AND WHAT'VE WE GOT?
27 SUPERMAN BOOKS, 42 BAT BOOKS AND 137 JLAs A MONTH! I WANT IDEAS PEOPLE, AND I WANT THEM NOW!
HOW ABOUT SCHOMPS SOME MORE SCHOMPS JLA BOOKS?
FOR GOD'S SAKE, BOB! I SAID, 'IDEAS'! THAT ONE IS IN THE PROCEDURES!
HOW ABOUT ANOTHER GREEN LANTERN BOOK?
I'M LISTENING...
ANOTHER GREEN LANTERN, ONLY THIS ONE IS BLACK!
YES! I LOVE IT!
WE CAN CALL IT BLACK GREEN LANTERN!
APPROVED!
HOW ABOUT A HAWKMAN BOOK?
GO ON...
ONLY THIS TIME HE'S A WOMAN!
WE CAN CALL IT HAWKMAN WOMAN!
NOW WE'RE COOKIN'!
APPROVED!
SORRY I'M LATE, EVERYONE.
THAT'S FINE, SHEILA. TAKE A SEAT. WE'RE ON A ROLL COMING UP WITH NEW BOOKS.
LET'S CONTINUE, GUYS.
GUYS?
TEE HEE
BLUSH
GIGGLE...
OH, FOR CRYIN' OUT LOUD!

INDUSTRY STANDARD

Phil Hall's look comics industry

WHAT I can't understand is actually something I can understand quite clearly, it just sits wrong with me.

We currently have a comics publisher that a little more than a year ago was facing bankruptcy and an almost farcical demise. Yet, a century later, it is now increasing sales, banking a lot with its critical acclaim factor and attracting people back to the company who wouldn't have pissed on its dying embers in 1999.

We also have a comics publisher that has more money than it has sense and that seems to think that by burying its head in the sand, and pretending everything is A-OK in the state of Denmark, it can carry on regardless.

You knew I was talking about Marvel. But did you know I was referring to DC? It's a bit like it was in the Sixties, except this time the world is a little less naive and a lot more clued in on wass 'app'nin'. Back in the days before Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, when Jim, Jimi and Janis hadn't popped their clogs, DC was so big it didn't really give a fig about Marvel (or anyone else). It had Superman and Batman and... well... end of story. The thing is, DC's output is pretty shitty at the moment. Even the reasonably critically-acclaimed Superman family is not really selling enough to be regarded as a major player anymore. Batman is not much better and if it wasn't for the number of spin-offs and sister titles, these icons would be completely dwarfed by the shadow of their history.

So, what has the huge Time/Warner/AOL subsidiary been doing about it? Keine Wurst (that's "not a sausage" for our non-multi-lingual readers). Nada. Zip. In fact, instead of dragging itself into the 21st Century the way Marvel has, it seems that DC is even more intent on persevering with its slightly Draconian policy of scaring its freelancers into an enforced silence and sticking embargoes on stories and news that maybe, once upon a time, might have been interesting to someone.

And, probably worse than anything else, they appear to be doing bugger all about redressing the creative balance. In fact, WildStorm has just hired Bob Harras (and Claremont)... That is so... Eighties! Cutting edge? Trimming hedges more like!

At the moment DC is about as attractive to upcoming creators as a bad case of acne, while Marvel is all silky, sexy and soooo kewl!

To be fair, it isn't just DC; Dark Horse is hardly setting the world alight, and even its good books are being ignored because that company just doesn't know how to manipulate its press.

It's obvious the competitors are all sitting around waiting for Marvel's latest revamp to go tits up. The problem with that is it could be a long wait, and many of them might not have the money or the patient benefactors needed for a long war of attrition. Anyhow, happy holidays! ☺ We're back around January 7.

Click on Globe returns to contents

DEPLETED URANIUM COMIC UNDER FIRE?

AN author using the medium of comics to bring attention to the use of depleted uranium (DU) weapons may have been victimised by persons unknown for speaking out. Davy Garland, researching depleted uranium at Lancaster University, received a package in August this year from Ian Hurst, designer of the book they had been working on, and noticed it had been slit open with a knife. The contents, a copy of the book and a CD-Rom, had been destroyed, leaving only a small section that referred to the surveillance and murder of an anti-DU campaigner.

Garland spoke to Squall (*http://www.squall.co.uk/uground.html*) about it, saying: "I think it is meant to be a warning. They could've taken it all or copied it without us knowing. I think they don't like the way we're using a medium [comic books] that's so accessible to the general public. It's a technique that pisses them off, because it turns so many people on to the issues."

The missing pages tell how DU, a radioactive nuclear power by-product, is used to tip armour piercing shells. They state that Allied forces fired over 900,000 DU rounds on Iraq during the Gulf war, and how extensive studies have catalogued the devastating rise in blood, heart and immune system disorders, cancers and birth defects that resulted. The comic also covers NATO's use of DU in the Balkans - where increased rainfall is dispersing the uranium much faster than in Iraq. The French journalist whose story was depicted in the pages that reached Garland was researching DU poisoning in Kosovo when he was killed.

Two days after the package arrived, Hurst discovered his home computer's hard drive had been disabled. "There were no signs of a break in," Hurst said, "but the engineer I took it to said the machine's basic input/output system had been tampered with and this could only happen by someone going in and altering it." Most of the computer systems worked as before, but all files that Hurst had created himself had been erased. Although he had an internet connection to the machine, it remained switched off while he was out, and he had fully functional firewall software in place. Hurst continued: "I lost three years work including three quarters of the DU comic project." A computer engineer who inspected Hurst's machine suggested that the damage to it had been too selective for it to have been a power surge, or even a virus - unless it had been a Trojan virus, able to breach the firewall while Hurst was online and target specific data later, but that would have taken a great deal of work.

US Gulf war veteran who has been badgering the American government and military for years

Garland and Hurst are no strangers to having their mail interfered with, as members of DAMDU (Direct Action Against DU, based in Bristol), networking between different areas of the anti-DU movement.

Garland explained: "This follows a pattern of harassment of DU activists that escalated in January when the mainstream press finally began to take the dangers of DU munitions seriously." As reported on Squall, that month alone Doug Rokke, a high profile US Gulf war veteran who has been badgering the American government and military about DU poisoning for years, was shot at; Ray Bristow, a British Gulf Veteran anti-DU campaigner, had his house broken into and his computer files tampered with; and Felicity Arbuthnot, a UK journalist who has reported extensively on the effects of DU, was rammed off the A11 road whilst driving home, by a car with no number plates.

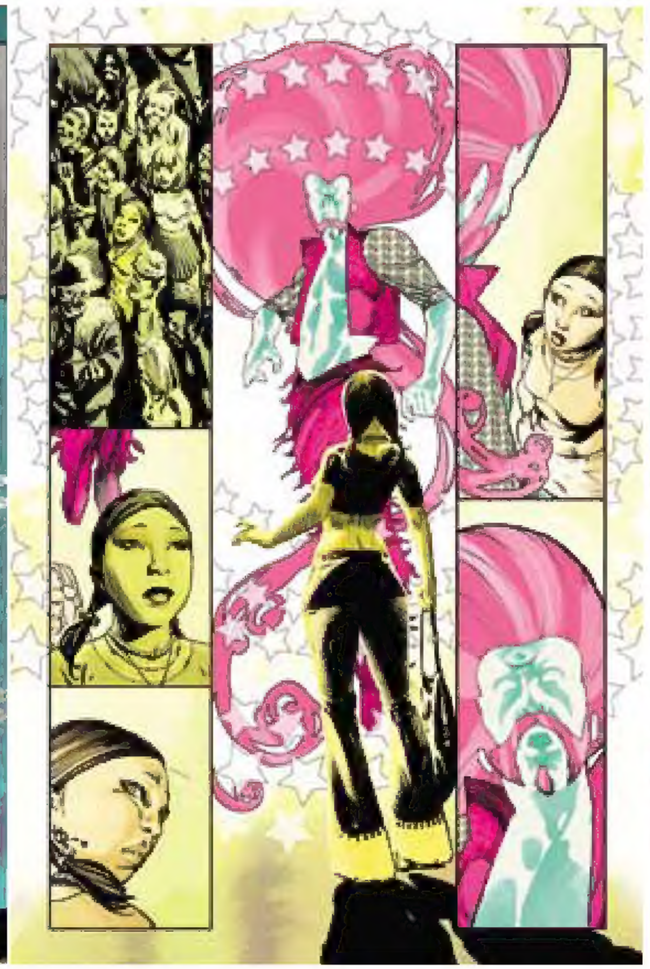
During the 1980s activists trying to stop building of the Plogoff nuclear power plant in Brittany produced an Asterix comic to help put their message across. The comic captured the imagination of local people but the French state banned it.

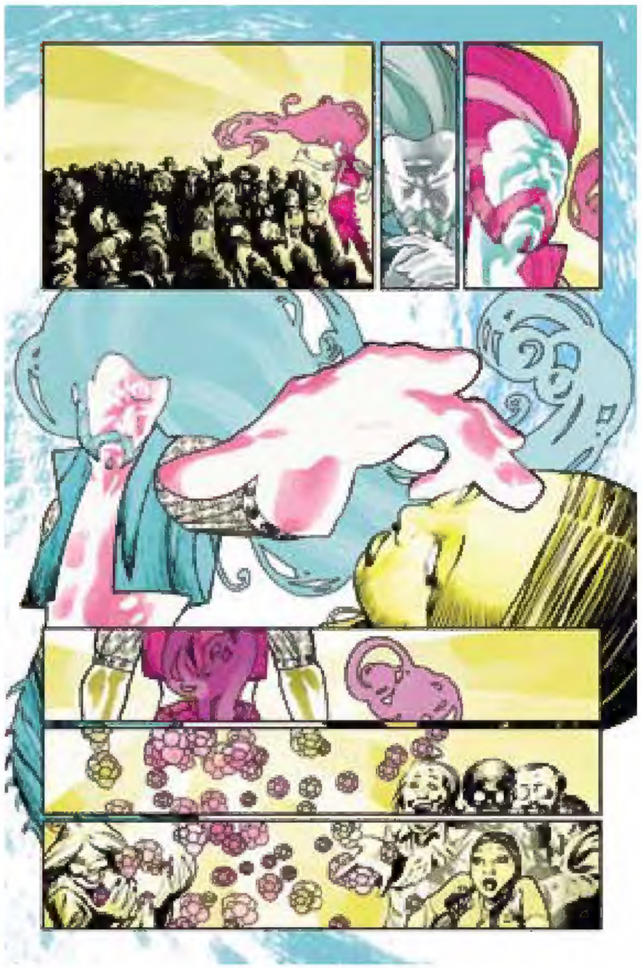
Even Alan Moore is believed to have faced surveillance and worse for his involvement in the Brought To Light project, which, based on the lawsuit filed by The Christic Institute, shone the spotlight on the Iran/Contragate scandal.

SONY Online Entertainment's award-winning EverQuest *is the most successful online fantasy role-playing game ever - with over 400,000 subscribers! Now DC/WildStorm Productions has collaborated with Sony to produce a brand new comics tale called Everquest: The Ruins of Kunark. The prestige format one-shot is by WildStorm founder Jim Lee - a big fan of the game - along with co-writer Brad McQuaid (also co-creator of the game), and inker Dan Norton. They have crafted an original story containing characters and events featured in the multiplayer online game, setting the stage for an adventure through the world of EverQuest. Journey to the land of Kunark alongside High Elven Princess Firiona Vie, as she and her comrades in arms must stop an unholy alliance. The great Elven Armies stand ready to defend the realm, but will they be enough to vanquish the rising darkness that threatens all of Norrath? The Ruins of Kunark is the first of several projects by WildStorm featuring characters from the world of EverQuest. Aaron Watanabe edits the 48-page WildStorm Productions one-shot. It ships this week (December 5th) with a cover price of $5.95 U.S.*

Click on Globe returns to contents

IRVING AND RENNIE GO STORMING INTO HEAVEN





BRAND new thrills nestle within the 100 pages of 2000AD's third annual special edition, Prog 2002. Alongside the ubiquitous *Judge Dredd*, by John Wagner and Greg Staples, *Nikolai Dante*, by reunited creative team Robbie Morrison and Simon Fraser, and returning classic war story *Bad Company*, by Peter Milligan and Brett Ewins, are two new series: *Shakara* (previewed in Borderline #1), by Robbie Morrison and Henry Flint, and *Storming Heaven*, by Gordon Rennie and Frazer Irving.

Their first full length collaboration since the wildly successful black and white horror series *Necronauts*, the 8 part *Storming Heaven* exchanges monochrome for a spot of Sixties psychedelia.

Irving told Borderline: "*Storming Heaven* is an idea which Gordon told me about whilst we were working on *Necronauts*. I liked the whole idea of the premise, and thought there would be opportunities within it to develop some rather funky characters. What I've got out of it so far is the central character of Dr. Trips. He's the "daddy" of the whole superhero culture in the story, and I intended to make him a particularly strange looking guy. As the story develops the mood takes turns for the worse and the figure of Trips has to respond visually to this, and so far he seems to be doing the job okay."

In the 1960s Ken Kesey, the recently deceased author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, declared that superhero comic-books were the true literature of the future, since they would prepare mankind for its imminent transformation into consciousness-expanded super-beings.

What if what he said had come true? Harvard, 1962: maverick psychology professor Adam Laar deliberately gives himself an acid overdose. The resulting coma sends his psyche smashing through the Doors of Perception. He awakens, reborn as Doctor Trips, self-proclaimed Prophet of the Fifth Freedom and the world's first psychedelic-enhanced superbeing.

The Love Generation flocks to Trips' sanctum in Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco, to follow his credo of "turn on, tune in, transform". Trips declares Haight-Ashbury the First Altered State of America, and the government abandons San Francisco to Trips and his growing army of followers, leaving a self-proclaimed "Capital of Forever" where the streets throng with dazzling psychedelic super-beings, rejoicing in names like Sunshine Superman, Mellow Yellow and Instant Karma.

But in the Californian desert, the distinctly Manson-like figure of Thomas Caliban holds court over his Family of followers. Caliban is a Bad Trip in human form, a living manifestation of all the madness and unhinged chaos that also lies on the other side of the psychedelic Door. Caliban was expelled from Haight-Ashbury in the early days, cast out into the wilderness gathering his own family of outcast misfits.

Caliban and his followers plan revenge for their expulsion, unleashing the psychedelic apocalypse upon their enemies, storming heaven itself to remake it in their own dark image...

2000AD Prog 2002 is available from December 12, priced £3.95

Click on Globe returns to contents

NEW CHARITY PROJECT FOR ANNUAL COMICS FESTIVAL

THE official UK comics festival, now in its fourth year, will return to Bristol in June 2002 - with a brand new venue and a new project for charity.

The two-day comics fair will be in The Empire and Commonwealth Museum, next to Bristol Temple Meads railway station, on June 1-2.

Organiser Kev F Sutherland said: "This new 15,000 sq ft ground floor venue enables us to house more dealers and exhibitors than ever before, with talks, exhibitions, exclusive bar and cafe, all under one roof.

"A dedicated loading bay gives us direct access into the hall, with an all day Friday set up - and there is no increase in prices."

He added: "We are planning a new style of unmanned exhibition stand which will enable publishers and their products to be displayed without the necessity of their being there in person."

He called on publishers and dealers to help attract big name creators to the event, as part of its policy of boosting the potential comics reading audience.

He said: "Every familiar comic creator who can attend the event becomes a named guest in our publicity.

"It is the policy of Comics 2002 to maintain the lowest door prices in the world in order to boost the potential comic reading audience, therefore the only way we can attract and fund the appearance of Star Guests is with the help of publishers and dealers."

He appealed: "If you feel you could help us bring over a Very Big Name, whose attendance would benefit your own comics business, let's start making that happen."

Comics 2002 is now an official part of Bristol 2008, Bristol's bid to become City Of Culture in that year. As a result, a renewed emphasis will be put on using the comics festival to promote comic art culture to the wider public.

Comics-related events are planned in the week preceding the comics fair weekend besides taking place on the weekend itself.

Kev Sutherland said: "We shall be increasing the involvement of our partners across the city of Bristol, such as Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, the Cube Cinema, Bristol IMAX, HTV and BBC Bristol and the hotels and arts centres that have already hosted our events.

"The National Comics Awards will be returning to Comics 2002, and we will be aiming to continue the success of our annual charity projects - Comics 2001's Deck Of Cards has now raised over £10,000 for ChildLine.

"We are planning events now, including Friday night's launch events, theatrical productions, screenings and talks, and events elsewhere in the country preceding the Comics Fair weekend."

Also planned is a large format programme, to be published in February 2002 and circulated via comic shops and a mailing list to a minimum of 25,000 customers.

Kev has also unveiled plans for a new charity event. He said: "My idea for 2002's charity project is... a comic. With a difference. As well as the original art being donated for sale for the charity and the printed comic being sold for the charity, one other big commodity would be donated to the charity: the characters.

"In a move emulating J.M. Barrie's donating of Peter Pan's rights to Gt Ormond St Hospital, my idea - which I'm running past a lawyer at the moment - is that these comic characters would remain the creative property of their creators, but that certain of their rights and a guaranteed percentage of any future earnings from further strips featuring said characters would go to the charity, most likely ChildLine."

He said all the characters would be brand new ideas, especially created for the charity comic by the world's leading comics writers and artists.

He said: "Thus we will have a unique opportunity to showcase a swathe of new comics ideas, in all genres from superhero to funny animals, from bande dessinèe to manga, from news strip to high art, in a one-off publication which will have the eye of the comics world - and beyond.

"If a publisher takes a fancy to any of the creator-and-charity-owned ideas thus showcased, the creators benefit and so does the charity."

He said he envisaged a number of star artists contributing panels to strips created by an initial writer and their chosen artist, there being far more artists than writers.

He said: "I would aim for no strip to be longer than three, maybe four pages, and for as many ideas as possible to try and make their mark in one page or a half page.

"Thus this comic will be very much in the style of the old British anthologies like Warrior, Deadline, Dandy, 2000AD and Eagle, with the onus being on each strip to be 'high concept' and grab its reader in the shortest possible time.

"In the current stagnant market, I'm hoping this is our chance to discover the new *V For Vendetta*, the new *Tank Girl*, the new *Desperate Dan*, the new *Judge Dredd*, the new *Winston Churchill Happy Warrior*."

He said he would be interested to hear from anyone if they can think of any reasons why such a project would or would not succeed.

Kev F Sutherland can be contacted by e-mail (*kevf@sitsvac.org*) or telephone: 0(1144)1275 871856. He is also the contact for display ad space in the programme.

The dealer and exhibitor space is being booked by Mike Allwood of Area 51 Comics. Interested dealers, small press and exhibitors should contact him to reserve space on (UK)0117 924 4655 or email *comics2002@talk21.com*. Availability subject to confirmation.

Art by: Hunt Emerson, Stephen Baskerville, Lew Stringer, Killian Plunkett, Gordon Tait, Duncan Fegredo, Simon Gurr & Charlie Adlard

Click on Globe returns to contents

BODÉS WELL

IN November, Fantagraphics published the eleventh and final volume in their Bodé Library series, Schizophrenia. Produced with the co-operation of the Bodé estate, the book collects Bodé's most personal stories, including the caveman masterpiece *The Man,* of which Ray Bradbury said: "The Man by Vaughn Bodé is very sad and very touching and full of the loneliness that must have been beast/man's long before we knew more of love and what it could do to save us from the uncaring universe and, often, ourselves."

Although he died tragically young in 1975, aged only 33, Bodé's work lives on, adopted by graffiti artists such as Kel 139 and Dondi, and referenced in hip-hop and rave culture, which have picked up on his most famous characters, notoriously stoned and psychedelic, in the same way that 60s hippy counterculture had done before them. His most famous creations include Cheech Wizard and Junkwaffel.

The title strip is an autobiographical piece, being published for the very first time in full colour, from the original art. The book also contains a wealth of Bodé's strips and rare illustrations, in a smaller and more intimate format than the preceding volumes.

Schizophrenia by Vaughn Bodé is available now from Fantagraphic Books in softcover, priced $14.95

THE SMARTEST PRIZE ON EARTH?

FOLLOWING the news in **Borderline** that Chris Ware's **Jimmy Corrigan** had been put forward for the Guardian First Book Award, it was announced on November 6 that the 380 page book had made it onto the shortlist, among five contenders. The full list of finalists is as follows.

Anthony Blunt, His Lives, by Miranda Carter; a biography of the art historian spy.

Carter Beats The Devil, by Glen David Gold; a fictionalised account of the death of US President Harding in 1923 after a stage appearance with an illusionist.

The Dark Room, by Rachel Seiffert; Shortlisted also for the Booker Prize, this concerns the Holocaust through the eyes of young Germans between the 1930s and the 1990s.

Wittgenstein's Poker, by David Edmonds and John Eidinow; a 270 page study of a 10 minute argument between philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper in Cambridge in 1946.

Jimmy Corrigan, Or The Smartest Kid On Earth by Chris Ware; The first graphic novel ever to be shortlisted for a mainstream book prize, concerning the titular character's search for a true father through the backdrop of 20th Century America.

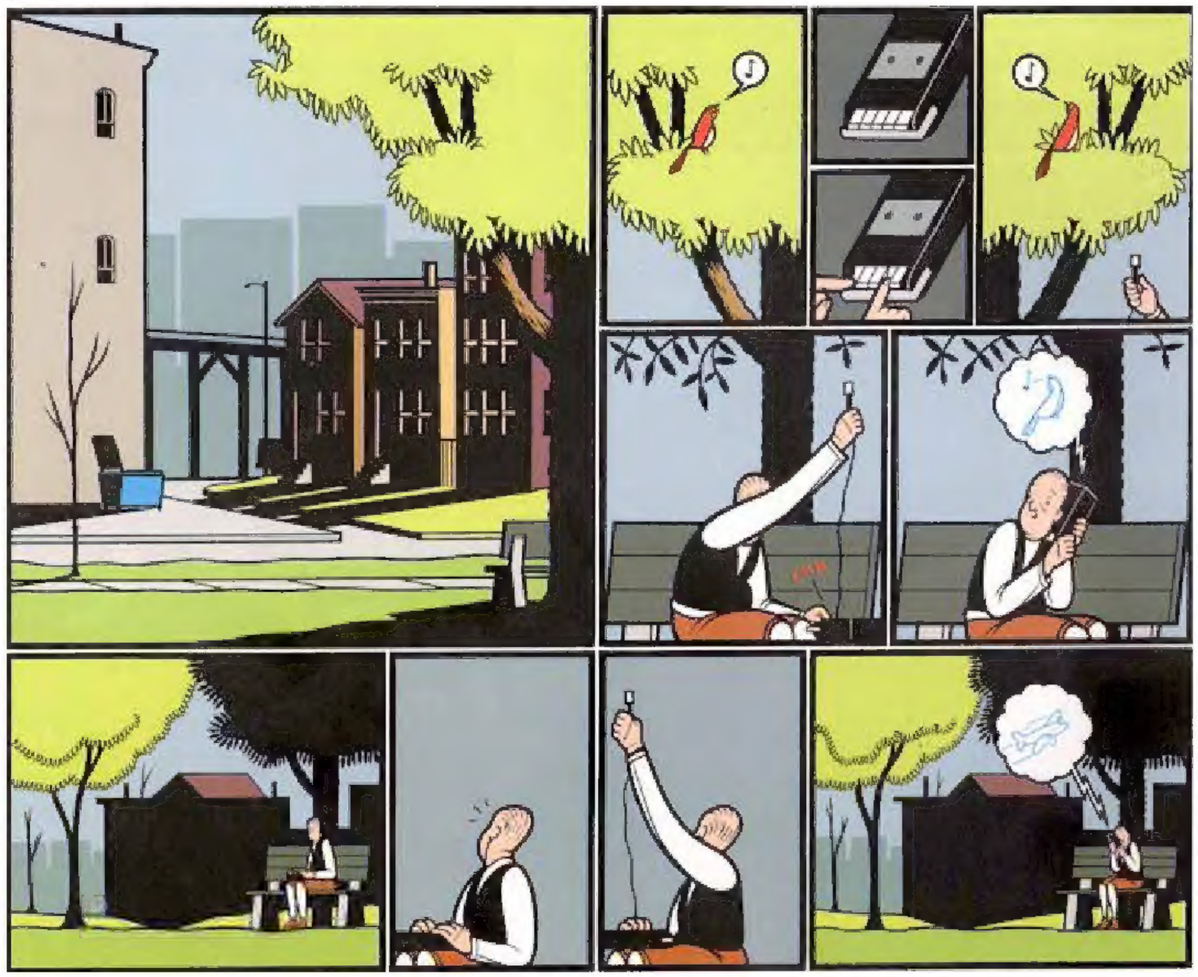
Described as "the Emily Dickinson of comics", Ware stands to receive £10,000 ($14,656) if he wins, and the exposure that the book will receive will boost sales and make it more acceptable for future comicbooks to be considered for contention.

The chairman of the award judges, Guardian literary editor Claire Armitstead, defined the purpose of the award as "encouraging readers to think beyond conventional categories at what really constitutes flair and promise in the changing world of books."

In **The Guardian**, legendary cartoon storyteller Raymond Briggs (creator of **When The Wind Blows**, **Fungus The Bogeyman** and **The Snowman**), described Ware's achievement as "astonishing," adding that

"**Jimmy Corrigan** must be the greatest thing in strip cartooning since **Little Nemo** [in Slumberland, Winsor McCay's classic]"

The First Book Award will be presented to the winner in London on December 6.



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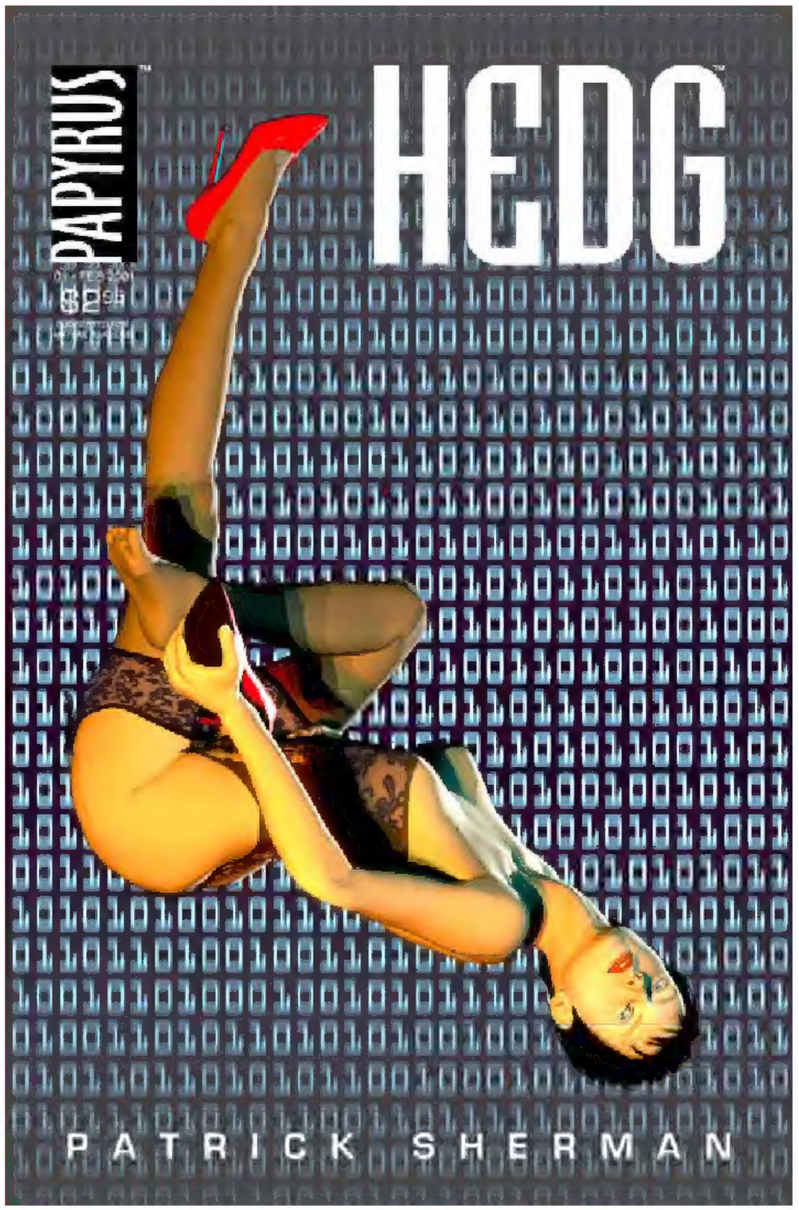


OVER THE HEDG

"SUBTLE and provocative" is how Patrick Sherman hypes his brand new computer generated comic series Hedg. Sherman believes his new comic "creates a credible picture of life in a world defined by technological advancement. At the same time, it is not a reinterpretation of the Frankenstein myth, of science run amok, but a deeper exploration of man's relationship with technology, told with a keen satiric edge".

Hedg itself breaks new ground as the first new comic book series begun with entirely computer-generated artwork. Sherman uses this technology to create a shadowy, *film noir* atmosphere. Borderline asked, *what is it all about?* "Without being melodramatic or raising expectations too high", Sherman said, "I think I will avoid answering that question for the moment. Particularly, these first few issues of Hedg have been consciously developed to reveal the story and the setting in a deliberate fashion. I could explain everything in detail, but I think that would deny you and other readers the experience of the journey that I hope Hedg creates. It is densely written - it will take a little time and effort to unpack - but rest assured that I am telling the story in this way on purpose.

"That said, Hedg is about the future. The denizens of that future world possess extraordinary technological capabilities, but this really is not the point of the story - and this is one reason why those facets of the story are handled in such an offhand manner. So, Hedg is ultimately about people. Whereas comics have traditionally focused on extraordinary people, my goal is to focus on ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances."

But, will it interest people?

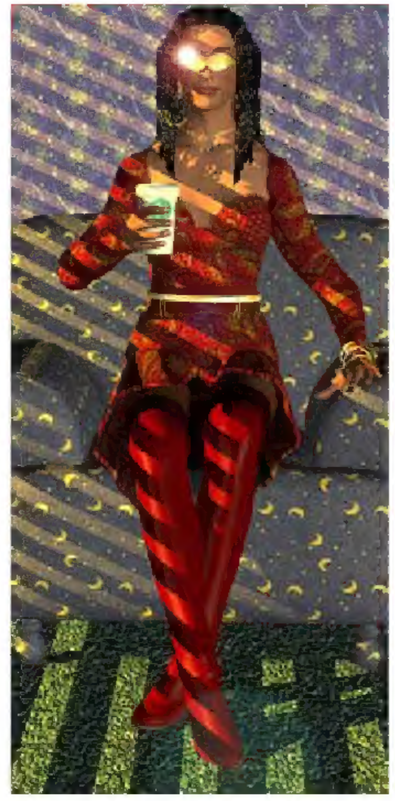
"I think the use of computer graphics is one reason people will be interested in Hedg. I have already seen sharp divisions on this point, so I do not mean to imply that everyone will like it, just that it will spark interest. Some readers have had a negative reaction to the graphics, to be sure. Others really seem to enjoy them - so I suspect this will ultimately be a question of personal taste. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time anyone has begun a new series of comic books using exclusively rendered 3D computer graphics. The comics industry has a long tradition of celebrating firsts like this, so it will be interesting to see the reaction to Hedg.

"Hedg [also] relates to my answer to your first question. I hope that I have woven a story that will capture the reader's imagination. I think too much of our popular culture, across a variety of media (TV, movies, comics, etc), serves up stories that are not sufficiently engaging - they do not create a place for their viewers/readers to explore. We see the same stories repeated time and again - I hope that Hedg can escape this mould, and tell the kinds of stories I enjoyed when I was younger.

"Finally, I hope people are interested in Hedg because of the characters. The main character, Paige Edgley, lives in a world of remarkable technological achievement, but I think it is her humanity that makes her most interesting. Her concerns are our concerns - the concerns of daily life. As I said, I have always been most interested in stories about ordinary people who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. This does put me crosswise with the longstanding comic tradition of focusing on extraordinary individuals - so I will be curious to see how readers react to mere mortals."

What are Sherman's hopes for the series?

"Well, my first hope is that it continues and grows, of course. The second issue of Hedg is already well underway, and will appear in the January issue of Previews. Beyond this, I hope it will be an effective platform to discuss real issues in the world at large. Though these first few books are aimed primarily at getting readers grounded in this complex world, I hope that satiric themes will begin to emerge as the series continues. Finally, I look forward to an ongoing dialogue with readers of Hedg. That interchange of ideas definitely piqued my interest in the comic industry."



Thirty-six pages in length with full colour throughout, Hedg will be available at local comics shops in February. It can be ordered through the December issue of Diamond Comic's catalogue, Previews. For further information send email to: *patricksherman@hedg.cc.*

Click on Globe returns to contents

WAID-ING ASHORE

MARK WAID has been allowed to slip the leash of his exclusive CrossGen contract in order to complete Empire, his former Gorilla imprint title. Part of the terms include him signing a new long term contract to continue writing Ruse, CrossGen's acclaimed new title, revolving around the distinctly Holmesian detective Simon Archard. Waid will no longer be required to work at the CrossGen studios, where most of their creators are based. CrossGen's Publisher/CEO, Mark Alessi, explained: "First, as brilliant a writer as Mark Waid is, he is not a man whose work habits and creative style fit perfectly with a studio environment. He's a bit more of a maverick, and produces his best work when he is able to work on his own terms. As we've said in the past, the CrossGen studio isn't for everyone, and so we've created a new situation that will ensure our fans will continue to enjoy Ruse, which I believe is easily the best work Mark Waid has ever done."

Waid echoed Alessi's sentiments: "I still strongly believe in CrossGen's approach to this industry, and I intend to continue doing the best work I can with Ruse, which is a title I enjoy writing immensely. I work best when I have more freedom than a studio system can provide me, and this situation gives both CrossGen and myself the best of both worlds. On my own, I'll be a better contributor to the cause, and I'm also thankful that Mark Alessi understood my desire to deliver Empire to the fans who have been waiting so patiently for it, and to also pursue other interests over time that might not have existed within the CrossGen structure."

Presumably among those "other interests" is Marvel's hiring of Waid to take over as writer on Fantastic Four.

FANCY BEING IN A DOCUMENTARY?

PAGODA Family Productions is seeking 12 to 19-year-olds who are into producing their own comics – or any kind of art – to be the focus of documentaries to be broadcast in the UK, by the BBC in March.

For further details contact the shows' producer, Nicci Crowther at 6 Flitcroft Street, London WC2H 8DJ; telephone 0207 836 7126; fax: 0207 836 7026; email: <*ncrowther.pagodafamily@civiliancontent.com*>

NEW JML ERA DAWN'S AT IMAGE

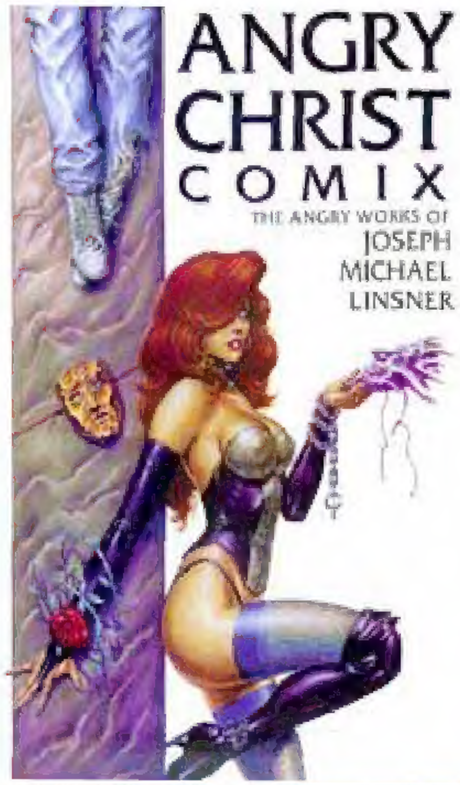


IMAGE Comics has announced a tentative release schedule for the Linsner Library - a series of graphic novels, prestige format and standard comics bringing all of Joseph Michael Linsner's work into print under one cohesive trade dress.

The Linsner Library will feature repackaged and reformatted older works, plus brand new releases from the artist.

Image VP-Publisher Jm Valentino said: "This is one of the single most comprehensive and ambitious projects Image has ever undertaken on behalf of a single author/artist."

The releases start in March with the Dawn: Return of the Goddess trade paperback, collecting the second Dawn series for the first time in graphic novel format, with 20 pages of brand new material.

July sees the release of The Art of Joseph Michael Linsner - a new book featuring a retrospective of Linsner's career, fully annotated by the artist with special features including how Linsner takes a piece from conceptual sketches to finished painting.

September's release is The Vampire's Christmas - an all-new 48 page prestige format book featuring Linsner's first big solo story of the vampire Esque.

In October/November - Angry Christ Comix, Linsner's earlier black and white work in a definitive trade paperback with special added material.

January 2003: Dawn: Lucifer's Halo trade paperback, re-presenting the classic first Dawn series with new Linsner Library trade dress and special goodies.

March - Dawn: Dramatica, 80 pages of Linsner's short Dawn stories, collected together for the first time. With this publication, all of Linsner's work will be in print.

June - Dawn III: Three Tiers. An all-new finite series, and also the first new Dawn series in four years!

Prices will be determined closer to publication dates. All books will bear the "Linsner Library" icon and will feature a standard trade dress.

Click on Globe returns to contents

Above: covers to The Path issues #1 and #3.
Right: Straight out of Great Universal Stores catalogue – CrossGen gets all up on the catwalk with its new fashion line!

21ST CENTURY CROSSGEN GOES ONLINE SHOPPING

Not content in doing anything by halves, Florida-based comics publisher shows it still has faith in internet commerce

THE CrossGen Online Mall has gone live, offering fans a chance to buy custom prints, original artwork, licensed merchandise and even comics.

The mall opened with five fully functioning stores, carrying hundreds of items.

It includes an apparel shop (that's clothes to you), licensed products, original art, custom prints, and comics. Items available include clothes, such as name-brand CrossGen T-shirts, polo shirts, ladies' wear, boxers, hats, backpacks, lithographs, comics and trade paperbacks, original art, and custom created and framed prints.

Orders will be taken through the stores and items will be shipped directly to the customer.

Custom Prints - A catalogue of more than 70 different pieces of CrossGen art is available online for fans to choose which piece they would like made into a custom art print. They are also able to choose whether they would like the piece signed by the team, or even professionally framed and shipped to their door.

Original Art - Many CrossGen artists sell their original art to fans. At the CrossGen Mall, fans will get first crack at the best pieces available.

Licensed Products - CrossGen's partnership with Dynamic Forces means fans are able to find special autographed lithographs and comics, portfolios and, in 2002, CrossGen statues.

Comics - A library of CrossGen comics and trade paperbacks are available for sale through the CrossGen Mall.

As CrossGen grows in popularity, its chiefs hope more items will be made available through the mall. Its aim is to meet the demands of both the hardcore CrossGen fan and readers who might be new to the CrossGen Universe.

CrossGen Director of Corporate Communications Ian Feller commented on the delays which troubled the site: "We originally planned to have the mall live by early September, and then early October, but sometimes things just don't go as planned.

"Because of the difficulties of coordinating the creation of five different web sites, with different programmers and designers and making sure they meet the quality standards we set for anything with the CrossGen name on them, these things sometimes take more time than anticipated. Now it is done and ready for everyone to start shopping."

The CrossGen Online Mall, is at www.crossgen.com <*http://www.crossgen.com*>. Click the link for Shop@CrossGen.com.

Since its initial launch on May 24, 2000, CrossGen Comics' first six releases have debuted on the comic book industry distributor's Top 100 sales list – an unprecedented feat for a new publisher.

Since then CrossGen has grown into the comic industry's fifth largest publisher. It was recently awarded the Diamond Gem Award for Comic Publisher of the Year (2000) Under Five Per Cent Market Share, and New Publisher of the Year (2000).

Its entire line of comics is currently published in three foreign languages and in at least 11 countries.

The latest addition to CrossGen's monthly titles is **The Path**, (pictured left), which is released in February 2002.

HARRAS JOINS WILDSTORM

FORMER Marvel Editor-in-Chief Bob Harras has joined DC Comics subsidiary WildStorm as Contributing Editor.

He will work from his New Jersey home office and, in an ironic reversal, will report to Jim Lee, WildStorm's Editorial Director. Lee shot to comics stardom with his work on **Uncanny X-Men**, edited at the time by Harras.

He has already begun to develop projects based in the WildStorm Universe, including the relaunch of **Gen**[13], written by Chris Claremont, and a new project written by Jimmy Palmiotti.

Harras said: "I'm really excited about working with Jim again. We have a great rapport and similar visions about comic books. I'm looking forward to putting out some good, fun comics with characters that people really care about."

Lee responded: "I've known and worked with Bob for almost my entire career, and I'm thrilled to work with him again. When he was line-editing at Marvel, I thought he was among the best in the business. He's phenomenal in terms of nurturing talent and keeping the creative process moving."

As for Harras's contribution to WildStorm, Lee added: "It's good every now and then to have someone come in with an outside point of view and shake things up a little bit. I think it's exciting for everyone, especially the readers."

Click on Globe returns to contents

MARVEL ROUND-UP

Touching tales in one small collection

THE critically-acclaimed **Peter Parker** team of Paul Jenkins and Mark Buckingham presents some of the most touching Spider-Man stories for years in the collection **One Small Break**, published on January 2.

What decision will Peter Parker make when an old enemy asks his help in making his final curtain call?

A new villain looks to even the score with Spidey... but what is his deep, dark secret?

And the web-slinger takes a break from crime-fighting to make it out to the old ball game.

One Small Break reprints **Peter Parker, Spider-Man** #27, 28, 30-34 as a 160-page trade paperback, with a cover by Kaare Andrews.

Weather forecast: Thunder and Raney

ASGARD has a new King and **Thor** has a new artist as Tom Raney steps on board to illustrate the Thunder God's adventures, starting with issue #45.

Change is the watchword of the day as a new era dawns for Asgard. But is it change for the better, or for the worse? That is the question that a trio of Asgard's finest warriors are asking as they journey forth on an essential mission for the new ruler of the Eternal Realm.

Dan Jurgens scripts, with Scott Hanna providing the inks. **Thor** #45 is released on January 2.

From Green Arrow to the Golden Avenger

GREEN ARROW: Longbow Hunters creator Mike Grell and Michael Ryan (most recently **Cable** artist) get under the armour of **Iron Man** as the new creative team on Marvel's monthly title.

In issue #50's double sized kick off to the latest chapter in Shellhead's story, Grell reminds us that, years ago, Tony Stark was a builder of weapons - but when he became aware of the cost in lives, he mended his ways.

Now, a cache of those long forgotten weapons has resurfaced, in a hot-spot nation torn by internal strife. How far must Stark go to prevent anyone else from being slaughtered by the fruits of his genius - especially when the power of Iron Man is denied him?

Editor Tom Brevoort, speaking about Grell's arrival, said: "If you look at everything Mike has done, his work has all the components of what makes up good Iron Man stories.

"He does great adult characters, has a good handle on technology, understands politics, and knows about the world of high finance - all in all, he has a good handle on characters. Every character he writes has some real 'meat' to it."

What If... Manga artists created the Marvel Universe?

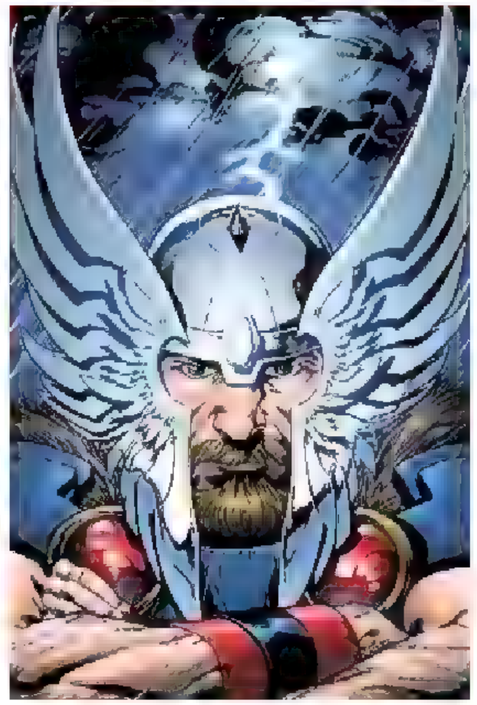
EAST meets West in a collision that could only be called the Marvel Mangaverse, starting in January with **New Dawn** #1.

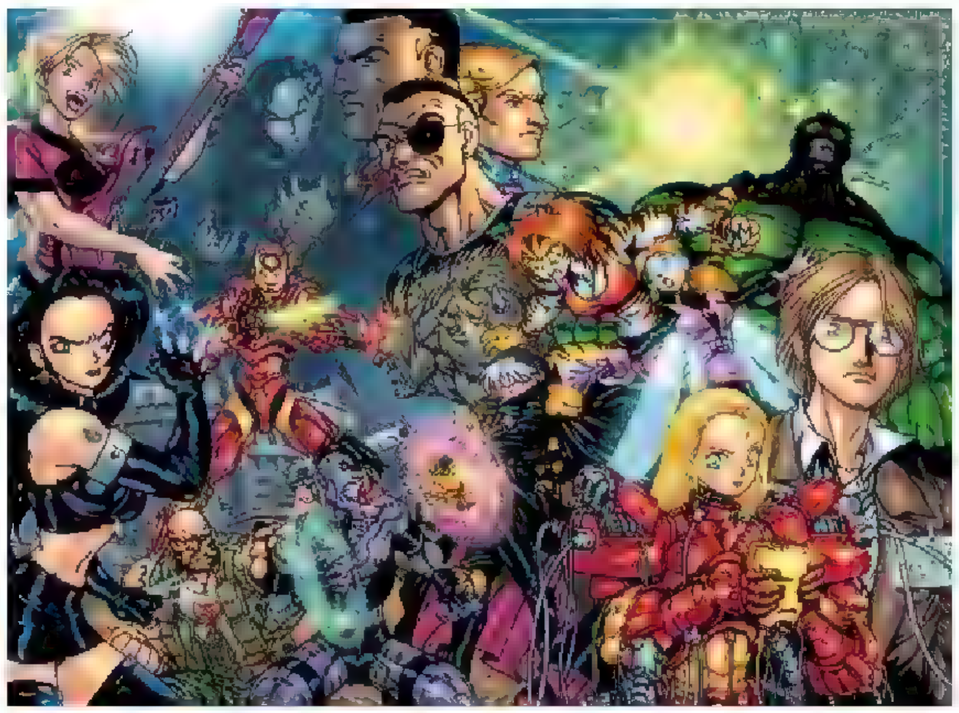
The Mangaverse welcomes readers to a world unlike any they have seen before - a world populated with wild reinterpretations of Marvel characters, but also a world starved for energy.

So desperate is the need that an Energy Well is built on Stark Island that will tap into an unlimited source in the Negative Zone. There is only one scientist who can tap into that source - a man named Bruce Banner.

Also in this series: Hydra is teamed up with Namor to conquer the world. Dr Strange is a Victorian doctor with Tigra as his sidekick. Ant-Man is a rock star/super scientist. The Wasp is a brilliant inventor and occasional tease to Banner. Iron Man is now Iron Girl; and the Hulk is a 20-stories-tall monster bent on destruction.

Ben Dunn (**Ninja High School**) writes, pencils, and inks it all.





Click on Globe returns to contents

ONE CAT AND HIS BOT

PAINTER and illustrator Ashley Wood, best-known for his work on Todd McFarlane's Spawn spinoffs such as Sam & Twitch and HellSpawn, has followed his first project at Idea + Design Works, a hardcover art book entitled Uno Fanta: The Art of Ashley Wood, with an abstract adventure series called PopBot.

Wood describes the series as: "A heady mix of *Jacob's Ladder* and Fritz The Cat with a side serving of David Lynch weird-ass salad. It's a tale of a cat who was once a universally famous rock star - his career is now in the toilet and he has incurred mythical sized debts with many and varying parties of bent nosed characters of questionable morals."

The title character, PopBot, formerly his roadie and now his protector, is also mistaken for an intergalactic outlaw. Unlike the famous feline, PopBot is someone whose path you don't want to cross - even on a sunny day.

Just announced is the addition of noted writer/artist/illustrator Sam Kieth, creator of The Maxx, Zero Girl and Four Women, as scriptwriter on PopBot. Kieth commented, "I've always loved Ash's art, and we've been wanting to jam on something for a while. After checking out Uno Fanta, I was even more inspired. For PopBot Ash already has the story basically worked out, so I'll be helping out a lot with

dialogue, much as Bill Loebs used to do for me on The Maxx. Cats, robots and underage sex pretty much hooked me in."

Speaking about his new collaborator, Wood admitted: "I'm a happy man - anybody with two first names has to be good! Seriously, his handling of characters is always sharp and greatly enhances their believability."

PopBot also contains material from other noted artists that Wood admires. Future guest contributors will include Mike Mignola and David Mack.

PopBot #1, with 48 duo-tone pages, will be published in January 2002 for $7.99.

Click on Globe returns to contents

BIRTH OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL COMIC?

A NEW basis for comicbook stories has reared its head with the publication of Tzimtzum: Prologue by new publishers, Illinois-based Shaddowfish Comics.

The premise for the series is that it is based on more than two dozen revelatory archaeological scrolls discovered by writer/publisher David J. Dentler's grandfather, George Dentler - scrolls which suggest that the world of myths and legends may not be quite as imaginary as we think.

Or, as the afterword to Tzimtzum: Prologue puts it: "This is not fiction. This is your warning. The facts, story and company history may border on the fantastic, and that is acceptable. Our goal is not to convince you, but to share the results of our findings with you."

The story itself is concerned with a conversation between the wanderer Narada and the old man Vyasa, in which Narada tells how he has dedicated his life to finding the holy lord Ansrk - the name of what seems to be his people's god - for a second time. This seems innocent enough.

But readers are warned by Paul R. Ohlson's introduction: "Keep an eye out for the small details in this book. Study the background scenery, as well as the main characters, and you will find pieces of a legacy that no one has dared to tell until now.

"Listen to the conversation between Vyasa and Narada. Really listen. They support and then undermine cherished theories and present new and subtle shadings of old interpretations. You will catch the sound of a collective consciousness long ignored and forgotten... if you listen."

Tzimtzum is available now, priced $3.95US/$5.10 Canada.

www.sfcomics.com

ENNS PAYS TRIBUTE

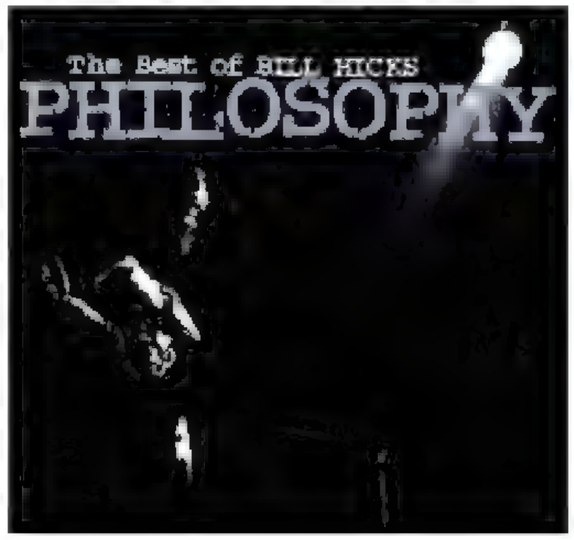
A LONG-TIME fan of fearless American stand-up comedian Bill Hicks, Garth Ennis has written the sleevenotes for the recently released Rykodisc CD *Philosophy – The Best Of Bill Hicks*, available in the UK and the US.

Ennis relates his experience of seeing Hicks perform live in Belfast in 1992, and his feelings as he sat down to listen to the CD in preparation to write about it.

Hicks died of pancreatic cancer at the age 32 on February 26th 1994, and *Philosophy* is culled from the four existing Rykodisc releases: *Dangerous* (1990), *Relentless* (1992), *Arizona Bay* (1993) and *Rant In E Minor* (1993). Rykodisc have attempted to put it together so as "to have the feel of a cohesive live concert, with Bill pulling out all the stops in a comedy performance that never happened."

From Ennis' notes: "Sitting down to listen to him one more time, I was surprised to find myself a little more laid back about the man and his comedy than I usually am. My long-standing rabid enthusiasm seemed to have faded slightly; after all, how could he still be so fresh and shocking and hilarious after so many repeat performances? I've seen his shows on tape and heard the CDs of his gigs and talked his routines to death with friends so often that all I was anticipating was a comfortable familiarity, a wry smile here and there at the old favourites. This 'Best Of' would join the others on the shelf, get dragged out every once in a while, be laughed at less and smiled at more, until one day .... Wrong again. […] You get tired of Bill Hicks and you're dead from the neck up."

An indicator of the contents of the CD can be found in the disclaimer warning on the packaging. It says: "Warning: This album contains *everything* your parents hate. *Everything* the Church preaches against. *Everything* the Government fears. Enjoy, Bill Hicks."

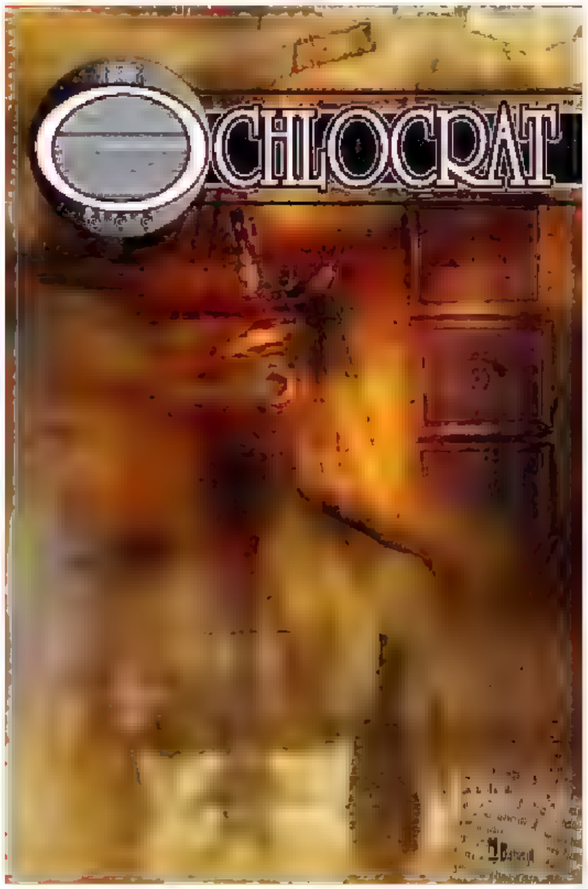


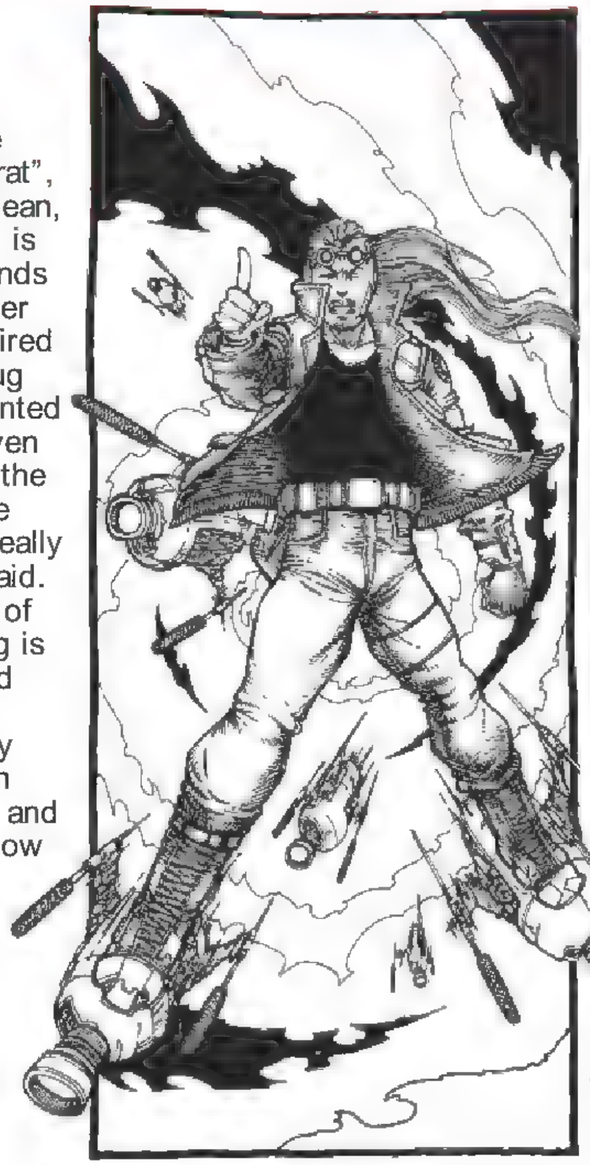
Click on Globe returns to contents

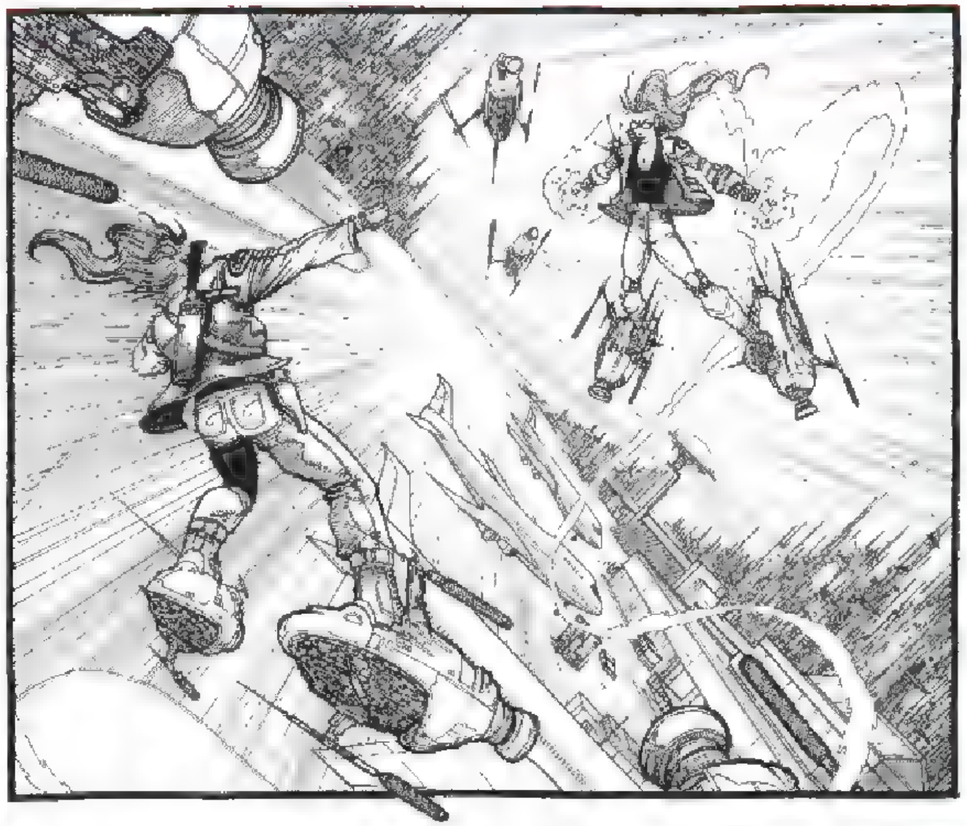
POWER TO THE PEOPLE

JANUARY 2002 sees the arrival of The Ochlocrat from Comics Conspiracy, publishers of bimonthly series The Generic Comic. Borderline spoke to the creative team, writer/publisher Doug Miers and artist Gerry Alanguilan (best known for his inking work on Stone and Marvel's X-Force, New X-Men Annual and Fantastic Four Annual).

Alanguilan said: "Ochlocrat is my very first pencilling and inking gig. The pay isn't as good as what I get as an inker from Marvel or Image, but I wanted to do this because I think the character and the character's name, "Ochlocrat", is just quirkily unusual. I mean, "Ochlocrat"? What the hell is that? Whatever it is, it sounds exotic, mysterious, and over the top. And it just really fired my imagination. I told Doug Miers, the writer, that I wanted to do it, without having even read what the concept [or the story] was because the title was just so damn cool. It really doesn't matter what I'm paid. I'm there for the sheer joy of it. In addition to that, Doug is a very talented writer. I had read his works on other Comics Conspiracy books like Taxman and Operator 99, and I was amazed at how funny and clever the stories were. And I knew I had to work with him on this book."



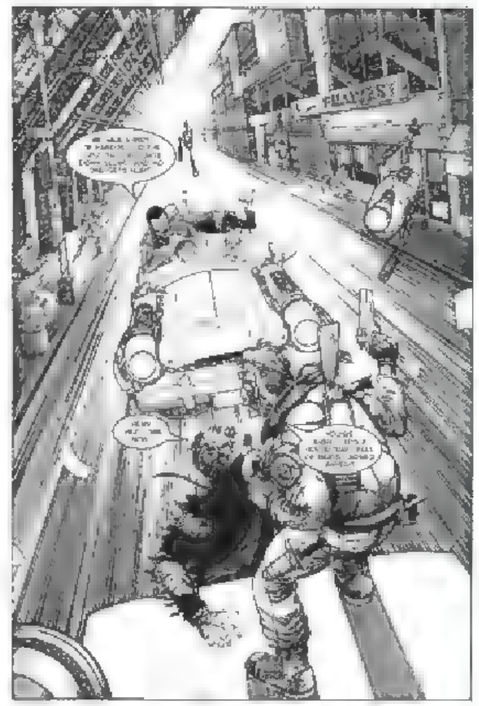




Miers was equally complimentary of his co-conspirator: "I've always been a big fan of Gerry's work, so when I heard he wanted to do a comic I jumped at the chance to collaborate. I had a few ideas kicking around, but I wanted something fresh and meaningful for this storyline. Gerry's artwork on this project has been nothing short of sensational. He's hit the ball out of the park with every page. The book will be printed in black and white - I wouldn't put color on linework like this, it simply doesn't need it."

On the subject of the title, Miers explained all: "I went fishing for titles in the dictionary. Really, you might be surprised how many interesting English words are out there that are not in everyday use. I found an interesting word, Ochlocracy, which means 'mob rule', [and] derived the word Ochlocrat from that. I tried to imagine a public official that could represent mob rule. The result is The Ochlocrat, a fast-talking video shock jock who uses a forum of reality TV court to bring the 'will of the people' into your politics, your business, and your home." The Ochlocrat is more concerned about ratings than justice, followed everywhere by remote control cameras, including the ones in his head. He is an elected official, empowered by spot polls on his own interactive channel to supersede normal due process and mete out "popular justice".

The Ochlocrat, a 24 page black and white one-shot with two variant covers by Gerry Alanguilan and Mike Bohatch, will be published in January 2002, priced $2.95

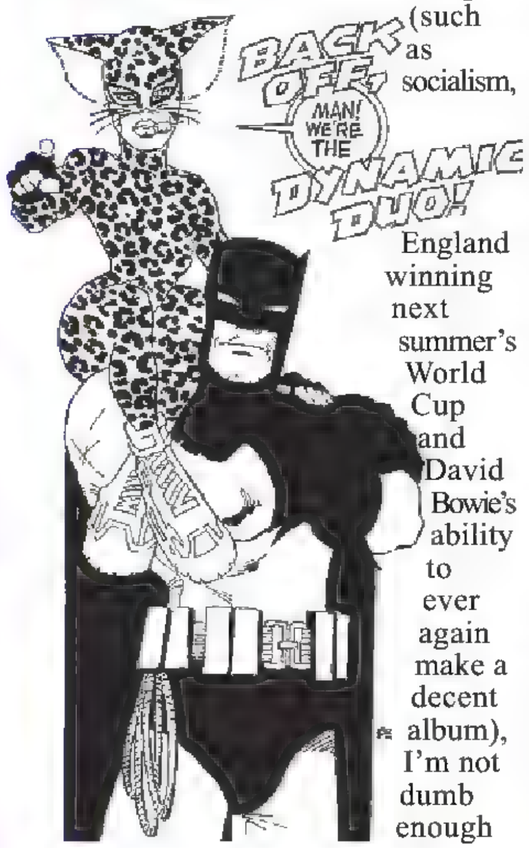


Click on Globe returns to contents

ISSUES

Carol Close has stacks of them

IT seems some sort of celebration is in order – at least if you believe a recent issue of the **Comic Buyer's Guide**, which announced its expectation that 2001 will show a growth in comic sales over the previous year for the first time since 1993. So, come on, crack open a bottle of Bolly, break out the bunting and, in the words of Andrew WK, party 'til you puke. If it's all the same to you, though, I'm going to stand over here in the kitchen with a small glass of white wine and a furrowed brow. Because while I'm willing to believe in some pretty whacko things (such as socialism, England winning next summer's World Cup and David Bowie's ability to ever again make a decent album), I'm not dumb enough to buy into the notion that comics are about to embark on some kind of grand economic renaissance - well, not until I see some evidence that they're enjoying a creative and attitudinal one, at any rate.



It seems such heretical views are very much in the minority, however, at least if you listen to one or two of the comic biz "suits" quoted in the CBG piece. "Comic books are getting better, and the growth in sales springs from a wealth of great comics coming to the market," gushed Marvel's Bill Jemas, while Image's Jim Valentino was, if anything, even more bloated with evangelical zeal, saying: "A wider diversity of product than at any time in our industry's history has not only re-ignited fans and retailer enthusiasm, but has given us the opportunity to reach a wider demographic than ever before."

I find these two quotes fascinating because they contain an intriguing mix of cynical corporatism ("Gee, maybe if we talk things up enough people might start believing us"), desperation ("Things have been so bad for so long, *please* let this be accurate.") and downright naïveté ("If good old CBG says it, it must be true."). Admittedly it's Jemas and Valentino's job to accentuate the positive and run with any slice of good news that comes their way, but to treat the somewhat flimsy "evidence" provided by CBG as anything other than mildly encouraging is spin on a truly Mandelsonian scale. Basically, we're talking a rise of no more than a couple of percentage points year-on-year (with most of those gains being made in December - the month the first issue of Miller's **Dark Knight** sequel just happens to ship). It's therefore easily possible that it's the same old readers simply buying *more* titles who are truly responsible for this tiny upturn than anything to do with comics reaching "a wider demographic than ever before".

The most irksome thing about Jemas and Valentino's statements, though, has nothing to do with interpreting figures, manipulating statistics or spinning data. Nope, it's their apparent and frankly mystifying belief that the industry's creative output has been good enough in 2001 to actually *deserve* any sales increase at all, let alone one capable of nudging it out of recession. Much has been made of Marvel's rejuvenation, but the company's much-trumpeted turnaround in fortunes is only noticeable on **Amazing Spider-Man**, **X-Force**, **New X-Men** and the Ultimate… titles, while most of the rest of their monthly books remain as dull as a seminar on dullness featuring dull Jack McDull as its headline speaker. Meanwhile, the company's adult-flavoured MAX imprint has been an unqualified creative disaster, its dreary recipe of "superheroes and swearing" unlikely to appeal to anyone truly deserving of the term "mature reader". In short, Marvel's twin philosophies are the same now as they were during the much-derided Bob Harras regime – "Superheroes With Everything" and "Re-jig, Rehash, Re-launch" (only now, in a bid to show how edgy and cool they really are, they're doing it without the Comics Code Authority's seal of approval).

The "RRR" mantra isn't only practised over at the "House of Ideas", though. One of the most depressing comic-related hours of this year for me came at the Bristol convention back in May as I sat through a presentation dedicated to DC's forthcoming projects. Other than the usual plethora of Batman and Justice League spin-offs, plus the obligatory multi-part crossover series, I was struck by just how much of the company's output concerned itself with dredging up past characters and premises even when they'd failed to capture the public imagination umpteen times before (**Deadman**, **Green Arrow**, **Doom Patrol**). It's like comics companies can't let go of the past, have an inbuilt inability to let characters remain dead and a subconscious belief that the best ideas were all used up decades ago so it's better to just keep bringing them out of the closet rather than thinking up any new ones. The same attitude underpins Marvel's Ultimate… line of books and has even prompted the usually faultless Hernandez brothers to disinter **Love & Rockets** after leaving it to rest in peace for five years.

A lot of this probably sounds enormously pessimistic to the wide-eyed innocents/Pavlovian fanboys amongst you and for that I make no apology whatsoever. My entire point is that while people buying more comics is unarguably a good thing (unless it's **US War Machine** or anything written by Devin Grayson), what we really need more than anything else is *better* comics, regardless of their subject matter. And no amount of trade press cheerleading or industry flimflam is going to convince me that sales are *genuinely* improving one iota until we get them. BL

Click on Globe returns to contents

THE BLANK PAGE

Chev talks about...

Emperor in "New Clothes" Shock

IT never takes long, does it? Hardly had the second issue of Marvel's Origin series even hit the shelves before industry commentators started taking cheap shots at it.

While debate and opinion is to be encouraged, what should be more encouraged is insightful and educational comment. And whenever anyone invokes the Emperor's New Clothes analogy, we should always beware - it means little more than that the perpetrator has nothing to say. Courting controversy is easy if you just target the most popular comic selling in shops worldwide at that given moment. Making a valid point takes a bit more effort.

The trouble with the Emperor's New Clothes tactic is that it automatically takes the superior attitude that the invoker is right, because a naked Emperor is a bad thing and anyone who would say otherwise is a fool.

It would be something if more publishers would take the risks that Marvel is currently taking. There are far too many companies happy to parade their characters around in the same out-of-date fashions - threadbare and smelling more than faintly foul - and never changing their clothes, year in, year out.

Well, some of us like the Emperor's New Clothes just fine, thank you. Not least of all because they are, unlike most mainstream comics on the shelves, something new.

Who Wants the Watchmen?

In the wake of the recent, successful movies of *Ghost World* and *X-Men*, the news that *X-Men* screenwriter David Hayter was reported to be working on an adaptation of Watchmen caused a resurgence of interest in this long-awaited project.

A movie version of Watchmen seems to be something of a Holy Grail for many comic fans. A successful movie version would mean, like *Ghost World*, that a finite storyline could be made to work in cinematic terms and also provide the movie-going public with a definitive product for purchase, rather than those awful comic book adaptations that proliferate in the wake of a successful film.

Dishearteningly, it is being taken as read that there will be compromises required in order to bring such a complex and multi-layered project to fruition, with conjecture about which plots and subplots were ripe for jettisoning in order to reach a prime movie running time of approximately two hours.

These are ambitious and somewhat premature speculations for Hayter, considering he has only the *X-Men* movie to his credit, with three other screenplays yet to be produced (including sequels to *X-Men* and *Pitch Black*).

Here's a thing: there is an optimum format with which to tell Watchmen without losing any of the intricacies and details for which it is justly famed. A format where the costumes don't look dodgy, the special effects budget is immaterial and even the pirate backups can remain. I imagine that twelve issues of good old-fashioned comic books could manage that.

That's not a movie, you complain. And you'd be right.

But why in the world would we want a *Watchmen* movie? While it's true that some of the more extravagant set pieces would make marvellous cinema, at what cost would this be to the rest of the story? Are we so desperate to see an acknowledged classic of comic literature made into a movie that we'll take it in any form we are offered? Because there's no way that Watchmen as we know it will ever make it to the big screen. It will never happen. If Terry Gilliam says it's unfilmable, then he's probably right.

Watchmen is too long and too complex to make such a transition without being effectively destroyed. In this, the fact that it is a finite and self-contained story works against its chances of being successfully filmed. Nobody will be able to condense the complexities of the characters and sub-plots and flashbacks into anything approaching coherency and no producer is going to sanction even half of its political, sexual and social aspects in a mainstream movie. In addition, no special effects team could possibly keep the budget below the astronomical; and no costume department could manage to keep to the look of the comic without embarrassing themselves and all fans of the series along with them.

Sometimes you can take a basic superhero like Batman or Spider-Man and give them an action film to star in. Sometimes a story like *Ghost World* will come along, with just the right characters and environments to make it ripe for movie adaptation. And sometimes you just have to know when to leave well enough alone.

Who's Who in D.C. Editorial

I was given a set of Who's Who in the D.C. Universe many years ago and it has sat on a shelf ever since, barely even glanced at. It contains some very nice artwork (and some that's very mediocre), but it is not what I'd call a constant source of reference.

Yet I've had cause to look through it no less than four times since I started reading Kevin Smith's run on Green Arrow.

Now, I'll be the first to admit I'm not completely up to date on the banal intricacies of either the D.C. or Marvel universes but I was under the impression that Smith was paid top dollar to write something that could be read by Green Arrow fans old and new, comic fans who had never read - or even heard of - Green Arrow. I also thought those elusive individuals, who have watched Smith's films, maybe read his Clerks and Jay & Silent Bob comics, might be enticed to pick up a superhero comic.

Which is why it's more than a little embarrassing for the majority of us to sit around witnessing Smith and a hardcore of Green Arrow fans indulging in a fanboy circle jerk.

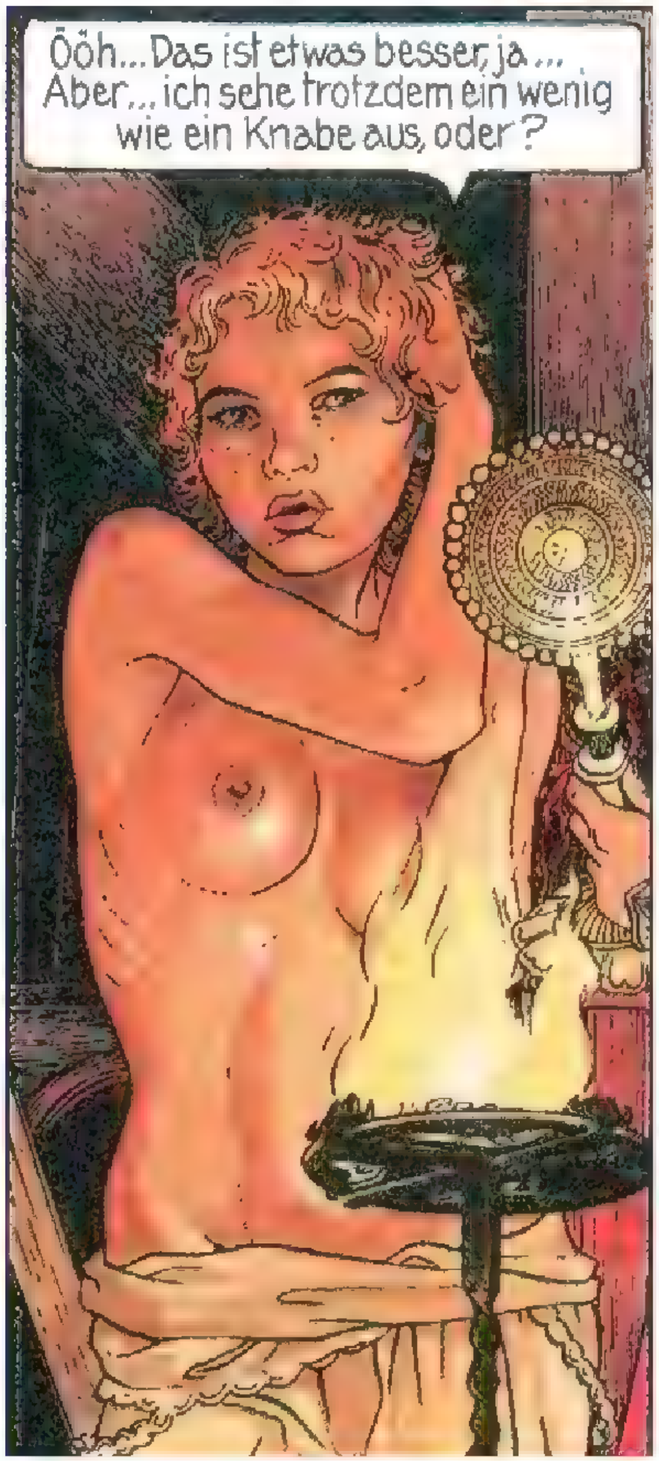
BL

Next Month: Targeting the most popular comic selling in shops worldwide at that given moment.

Click on Globe returns to contents

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

Kevin Schomburg continues his Franco-Belgian odyssey



UPON opening the album **Le Dernier Chant des Malaterre** (The Last Song of the Fools) by François Bourgeon the reader faces a young woman sitting amidst a thunderstorm, smiling. The full page illustration serves to show that women are very much tougher than men, because any sane male would probably put a shirt on in such weather…

The book is the third and final volume of Bourgeon's trilogy **Les Compagnons du Crépuscule** (The Companions of Twilight), which was started in 1986 and finished four years later. The strong influence of the fantastic in volumes one and two was later discarded by Bourgeon and the series' final volume became instead one of the most impressive illustrations of medieval times ever to be published in comics format. It tells of three substantially different characters who become companions by chance, and of their travels through 14th/15th century Europe during the Hundred Years War: Anicet, a scoundrel who follows the mysterious Knight, and the young woman, Mariotte, who so daringly braves the elements on the inside cover. The war-torn Europe they travel through reeks of piss, death, sex, and violence.

As in all of his works François Bourgeon's tale doesn't focus on a single protagonist, but nonetheless plays to a strong female lead - so Mariotte is the central figure of the three albums. As is the case in many other illustrations of the Middle Ages, many with a very strong influence of fantasy in them, women and their sexual attractiveness are integral to the story and the drawings at large. Hence, while Bourgeon has paid a lot of attention to authenticity while drawing **Le Dernier Chant des Malaterre**, it has to be asked how closely his rendition of women resembles reality. Bourgeon keeps most of his women locked away behind closed walls. They are the focus of male sexuality, their life in the "chambres des dames" is uncouth and bare, their demeanour is sexually oriented and self-determined. This is closely related to the aesthetics and content of contemporary mediaeval literature: the women were the romantic target of men, their chambers a place of seduction and amusement. In reality women *were* locked away, as adultery was a quite common occurrence in the Middle Ages - young men had to prove their worth by seducing the lady of the house. All the more reason for her husband to keep her incarcerated in her own apartments!

Even though Bourgeon presents the nude bodies of his female characters at regular intervals (and probably to raise

Beim Blute Gottes, Mariotte! Macht dich der Gedanke an schöne Kleider nicht übellaunig?
Mir ist, als drohe über dieser Stadt eine Gefahr, die ich nicht benennen kann. Der Winter verzögert sich. Ergreifen wir die Frist, die uns noch bleibt, um woanders Zuflucht zu suchen.

interest on the part of his presumably predominantly male readership), his drawings are executed in a well researched manner: nobody would have thought partial or full nudity offensive in the Middle Ages, at least not in the seclusion of the home (in public, however, people had to be dressed according to standards).

The author's lavish use of illustrative detail is also apparent in his vivid city scenes and an impressive use of architectural panoramas. In comparison to Hermann's epic **Les Tours de Bois-Maury**, however, François Bourgeon's **Le Dernier Chant des Malaterre** pales, at least from an historical point of view, as its story transcends its era and, in the end, too many stereotypes are employed. Overall, though, it stands as an amazingly detailed and beautiful album set in the Middle Ages, fascinating the reader with an epic storyline, well researched historical background and a clever use of symbolism and apocalyptical vision derived from its fantastical roots.

Les Compagnons du crépuscule, volume 3 : Le Dernier Chant des Malaterre is a 142 page hardcover album published by Casterman. Other important works by François Bourgeon are Les Passagers du Vent and a science-fiction epic, Le Cycle de Cyann. **BL**

Click on Globe returns to contents

LEARNING CURVES

Sarah Littlehales speculates to accumulate

STEEPED in over 30 years of history and over a thousand issues of continuity, with a following that spans generations, **X-Men** has been Marvel's unofficial flagship title, outselling even **Spider-Man,** for many years now. However, no matter how long an X-Title remained the top selling US comic book, the catalogue of back issues and spinoffs declined in price.

No matter what Marvel tried it could not boost falling sales. The latest miniseries or spinoff, embossed variant covers, Anniversary landmarks, special signed & sketched editions; nothing seemed to work. It looked like the self-styled "House of Ideas" had run out of ideas.

Then along came the dynamic duo of Bill Jemas and Joe Quesada, shaking up Marvel's pedestrian life. It looked as if Quesada was going through his address book to pull in many popular artists and writers to work on the big name characters. Garth Ennis took on the Hulk, while John McCrae and *Babylon 5*'s J. Michael Straczynski tackled various Spider-Man titles.

But what about the X-Men?

Seeing their mutants bogged down by years of multiple spinoff titles, Jemas and Quesada took the bold and much needed step of cancelling many of the lagging titles. Adios, **Hidden Years**! Dosvidanya, **Gambit**, Sayonara, **X-Man**, and a fond farewell to the rejuvenated **Generation X**! Yet it still remained for something to be done with the X-Men.

Suffering from the return of Chris Claremont, fans were desperate for a shake up. It was predictable that it would happen, but no-one knew what "it" would be. Gradually the news broke. **Madman** artist/creator Mike Allred and writer Peter Milligan would take over **X-Force**, a previously meandering spin-off. Joe Casey and Ian Churchill, who had both previously worked on separate eras of **Cable**, were now assigned to **Uncanny X-Men**. Meanwhile the Scottish duo of Grant Morrison and Frank Quitely would reunite from their success with **JLA: Earth 2** to focus the main change of the X-Men. Casting a watchful eye and a hand of God over the mutants' new look, Morrison retitled **X-Men** to **New X-Men**, ditching the spandex in favour of day-glo leather and selecting only his favourite characters for his reborn team, casting his scraps down to Chris Claremont for the more traditional **X-Treme X-Men**. The only thing that Morrison had no say over was the **Origin** of Wolverine, a story that Bill Jemas felt had to be told before Hollywood did it.

Only time would tell whether the changes would live up to the hype. Now time has told, and sales of the X-Men books have rocketed.

Marvel now follows a policy by which it will only print to the amount of issues pre-ordered, and that's it… no more, no second or third printing, only the first. Instead of flooding the market they've held back while using the power of press releases and Internet hype to increase demand. And it seems to have worked!

As for back issue demand, the only real competition that Morrison's first issue, **New X-Men** #114, faces is from **Origin** #1, with **Uncanny X-Men** #394, **X-Force** #116 and **X-Treme X-Men** #1 trailing in the rear. **Origin** and **New X-Men** #114 can fetch up to £20 each! That's great news for the traders, but not for those readers who missed out when they sold out on the first morning of release. Those issues were bought in multiple by collectors as soon as they touched the shelves, and since there're no reprints they're an expensive gap to fill in your collection. There's always the trade paperback that will reprint the entire story, but it's never the same as having the actual issue in your hand.

The good news is that interest in those X-Men stories of the past has stirred again. It's not exactly soared to dizzying heights, but it's a start. Average issues are still cheaply priced due to the slump of recent years and so can easily be picked up by new readers, while the "landmark" issues of the past are steadily climbing in price. **Uncanny X-Men** #266 (the first appearance of the then

Click on Globe returns to contents

enigmatic Gambit) can fetch anywhere from a fiver on up. The marriage of Cyclops and Phoenix in **X-Men** #30, along with **Uncanny** #350 (the trial of Gambit and last appearance by fan favoured artist Joe Madureira), are still hard to find and will each sneak a sly tenner out of your pocket. The famous *Dark Phoenix Saga* (**Uncanny** #129-137) had slumped to a mere pound or two per issue, but is now reliving some of its former glory due to the involvement of Grant Morrison's favourite dominatrix, Emma Frost, the White Queen.

There are plenty of good issues that are still underpriced for the stories they provide, though, so go out and pick them up while they're still affordable. Try the heart-warming rendition of Wolverine as he's lumbered with Katie "Energizer" Power from Power Pack (**Uncanny** #195), or the birth of Cyclops' ill-fated son while Cyke's role as leader of the X-Men is stolen by a powerless Storm (**Uncanny** #201). How about the complex Psylocke/ Kwannon story that attempted to explain one character's transformation from English rose to Asian assassin (**X-Men** #'s 21 & 22, and 31 & 32), or the amazing four-month long saga of the Age of Apocalypse?

Whether you're recapturing stories from your youth, catching up on what's happened since you last read them ten years ago, or are a reader new to comics altogether, it seems that this is the best time to buy those X-Men back issues before they sell out all over again. **BL**

X-Men Manga – the next hot X-book or just another failed cash-in attempt?

WHAT IS MANGA?

Kevin Hill examines more manga classics in his examination of the work of the all-girl art group, Studio Clamp

Clamped Up

BEFORE I finally settled on a topic for this month, I considered writing about one of the things I most love about Japanese comics: character design. Actually, that's a complete lie. What I was planning to write about was fashion in Japanese comics. Why? Because Japanese comic character and costume designs highlight a major lack in Western comics. Take the X-Men - the new costume designs are lovely, great, fantastic (okay, so this isn't a view shared by everyone, but I'm trying to get a point across). But what about the kinds of clothes Jean Grey wears when not in her swanky new outfit? What you end up with is a variety of outfits worn whilst not in costume, all reflecting the artists' individual skills, and their (lack of?) taste in terms of female fashion.

Okay, I'm losing my way a bit, but now you know my reasons for the intended topic. As I started looking into the various artists whose work most exemplifies the use of fashion as a part of their art, I noticed one name that kept arising: Clamp. Studio Clamp, to be precise.

Studio Clamp has the distinction of being one of the few, perhaps even the only, successful all female studios of comic creators. The studio members are Mokona Apapa, Nanase Ohkawa, Satsuki Igarashi, and Mikky Nekoi, with each member taking a part in the production of the books.

The core style of Clamp's work fits the stereotype often given to Japanese comics - that of "big eyed, pointy nosed schoolgirls" - but contained within the artwork is an attention to detail that would shame many Western creators; that and an often obscene amount of screen tone.

Several series have been translated, most containing a fantastical element, whether magic, science fiction, or the supernatural. These are: the magic oriented, and very child friendly, Cardcaptor

Click on Globe returns to contents

Sakura; the pre-teen aimed Magic Knight Rayearth, with its fantasy adventure story of magic and heroics; the heavily stylised science fiction story Clover; the earliest of Clamp's series to be translated, and the most mature in story and look, X/1999 - a tale of powerful psychics battling over the fate of the world (although it is set mostly in Tokyo).

Many of the elements of the stories are similar, from the schoolgirl/boy characters to the strong emphasis on friendship, but, with the use of shade and line, it is the looks of the individual series that differentiate them most. X/1999, being the darkest of the works, relies heavily on shading to give it the sombre look that goes so well with the story - that of a young schoolboy who will either be the saviour of Earth, or a harbinger of its destruction. Rayearth, however, employs only a limited amount of shading, using it mostly to add stunning special effects whenever magic is performed by the knights - three teenage schoolgirls - or their foes. Cardcaptor Sakura shares this limited shading, but uses more simplified line work to reflect the age group at which the story is aimed - although Sakura is still an enjoyable, fun story regardless of what age you are, in a manner similar to Disney movies. Clover, the most recent of Clamp's works to be translated, uses the simpler style found in Sakura, but taken to extremes , with shading making very limited appearances. Instead, a stark contrast is shown between the black of the artwork and the white of the page, giving the futuristic context of the story a suitable look.

Additionally, Clamp use character designs to give their stories a separate identity. This is mostly evident in the fashions worn in each book - which is why Clamp came to mind when I was considering the original subject for this month. Of their books,

Cardcaptor Sakura takes this fashion aspect too far, with Sakura rarely wearing the same outfit twice except when at school – and even then the school outfits are also designed, from the standard uniform to the sports wear and swimwear. The designs used when Sakura is battling to recapture Clow Cards - the central plot of the story - range from the simple to the bizarre, with an almost fetishistic quality to many of the outfits, something unlikely to be seen in Pokemon or its ilk! With the primary focus of Sakura, Rayearth and X/1999 being schoolchildren, school uniforms play a major part in the stories. However, these do not always remain untouched, with the Magic Knight trio of Umi, Fuu and Hikaru wearing armour along with their uniforms, appropriately for the fantasy genre that Magic Knight Rayearth exists within. As a departure from what could be considered the norm, the characters in Clover are dressed in styles to match the futuristic and somewhat dystopian setting of the story, a look similar to the designs for films such as *Blade Runner*, but without the grubbiness of Ridley Scott's decor.

Clover, Magic Knight Rayearth and Cardcaptor Sakura are available in collected form

from Tokyopop. X/1999 is available from Viz Communications. BL

Click on Globe returns to contents

MAN ON A MISSION

Martin Shipp's vision of a better comics industry

HOLD the front page! Cancel the Kirby Dots of Negativity! It's all presto-change-o here at Man On A Mission as shafts of bright sunlight pierce the scowling lowering veil of grumpiness and, falling like urine from a freshly-thrown cat onto the upturned faces of the expectant audience, make us all Glad To Be Alive.

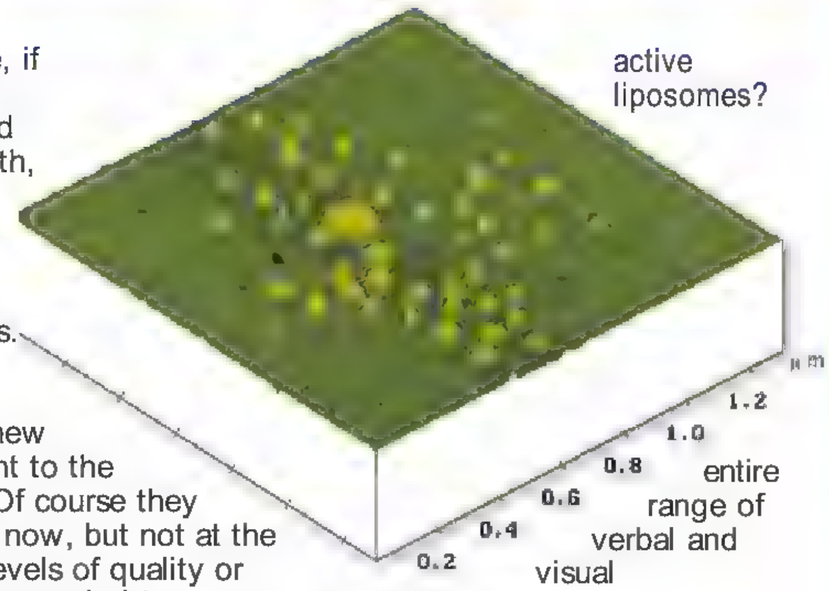
First! Good news from the War Against Terrorism - Super Heroes (tm) are now more popular than ever! More people than anybody can ever remember are gobbling up superheroes since that starey-eyed man with the beard did bad things. TV programmes featuring superheroes are being watched by very large amounts of people, and that can't be bad, can it? Speak up, there's somebody rhythmically banging their head against a wall and the noise is kind of drowning you out.

Second! Modern Technology - it's not just here for the nasty things in life. Scientists - and what a scarey yet knee-wateringly exciting word that is - have come up with something called the "Last Book". Not the ultimate in Apple Computer portables, oh no; this is a sheet of something called "rewritable e-paper", which to my way of thinking sounds like something out of Laborotoires Garnier and should be trusted about as much as liposomes, AHA molecules, or piranhas down your Y-fronts. This thing seems to be a really flexible portable screen that could theoretically carry a chip which contains everything ever published ever ever; the chip could theoretically push its information onto the screen one page at a time, accessing the information much as any other digital retrieval system does. So you could, if you wished, read any page from any book at any time. How good is that? Of course, the chip containing every book in the world would have to have a separate sister chip to carry one month's worth of X-Men titles, and a further Sainsbury Wing chip to explain the continuity.

Just think how groovy this thing could be! For years Scientists have been pushing the e-book, but for equal amounts of years Luddite nay-sayers have been saying "ah, ah, but! You can't roll it up and put it in your pocket though, can you?". These are mainly the same chaps who say "comics are supposed to be read, you're meant to roll them up and put them in your pocket", then go home to hermetically sealed rooms full of Mylar (and that's just the kitchen).

Let's carry this idea a teeny bit further; if the concept of the Last Book exists, even theoretically, then that concept is open to improvement. This isn't difficult; all you have to do is consider the advances in mainstream computer tech over the last few years and even a thicko like me can see that the workings of the Book could easily integrate an always-on net connection, and by extension could continually receive updates of everything ever published. It'd be the British Library in your pocket (or would you just be pleased to see me?).

Therefore, if it could do that, it could do away with, ooh, publishers, and distributors and retailers. Creators could just download new work straight to the consumer. Of course they can do that now, but not at the necessary levels of quality or convenience needed to compete with the traditional media.



Eliminating as many as possible of the barriers between creator and consumer is probably one of the most fundamental necessities in the search for A Better Comicbook. Every intermediate adds a further need or cost to the equation, whether it's the cost of paper or the cost of a suite of offices on Park Lane, the need to make a creation more marketable or the need to impinge editorially on the creator's original vision.

As a lifelong adherent to the doctrine that "Purer Is Better", a doctrine which I've only ever compromised upon finding that I possessed equivalent artistic talent to a small cauliflower named Henry, I cannot disagree with any advance that prevents the dilution of the creative vision. The Last Book, as OmegaMannish as it sounds, might well be something that actually does change not only the comics medium, but the entire range of verbal and visual information.

Let's not get carried away here, though; no matter how direct the link between creator and consumer there will always be a point at which communication weakens, and that point will always be insurmountable by technological advance. Language itself prevents absolute purity of communication; in order to tell you something I have to express my idea in words or pictures or some other form of language. My translation from concept to message may not be perfect enough to communicate my concept as exactly as I originally conceived it. Your translation from received message to received concept - how you take my ideas and make your own picture of them inside your head - will never be an exact reverse translation of the message I sent to you.

No wonder we're in the middle of a war.

Next Month: More Big Laffs, plus Second Great Feature! BL

Click on Globe returns to contents

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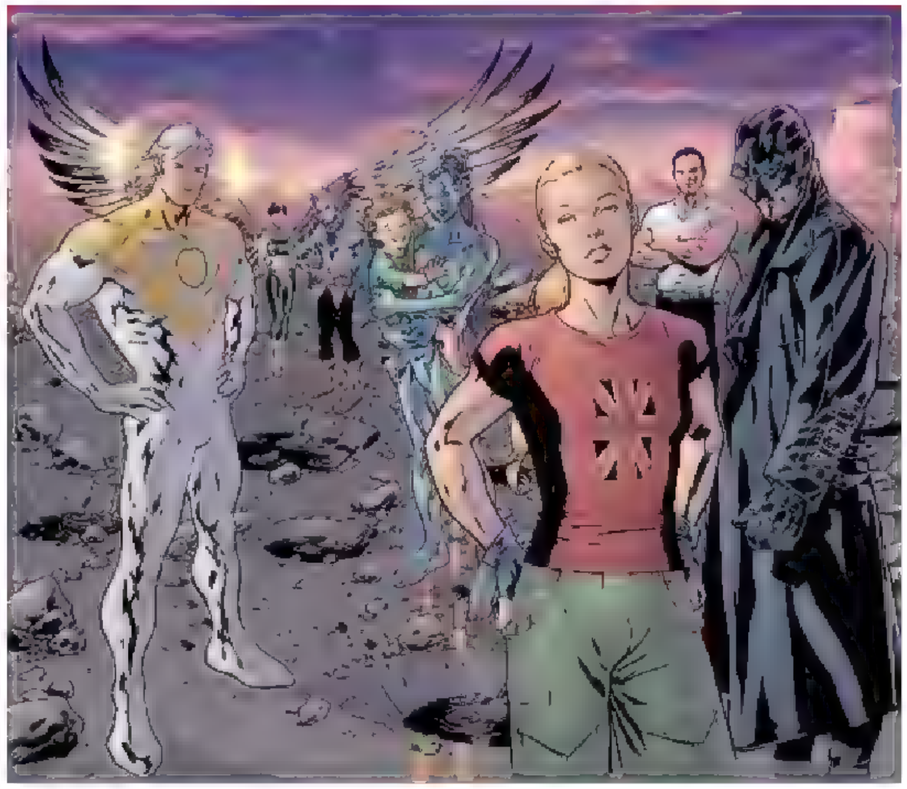
BURNING DOWN THE CURTAIN

Rich Johnston's controversial look behind the closed doors of the comics industry



ONE of Wildstorm's best selling comic books used to be **The Authority**. Created by Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch from the ashes of **Stormwatch**, a political superhero book that Ellis had written previously, it was relaunched with a fresh cast, a new title, all the sophisticated suspense removed and more explosions inserted. The fans loved it.

Ellis also emphasised the "questionable morality" of **Stormwatch**, giving the team the motivation to solve world problems that the likes of DC's **Justice League** would not. It was this aspect that Mark Millar, Ellis' successor as writer on the title, picked up on. Shortly after **The Authority** was first published, DC Comics bought Wildstorm. When Millar took over and started to push things further, trouble began and could be seen publicly.

DC began to interfere in the book's content; differences between online previews and the finished version were seen. Identifiable countries were changed to generic ones and the "President's" identity was removed. Battle scenes were blurred so as not to show gruesome events clearly. The language and clothes were also edited to be less offensive - and all this after the artwork had been finished.

The book had gained appeal by pushing the traditional envelope. However, a good-luck kiss between the male couple Midnighter and Apollo had been removed from the **Jenny Sparks** spinoff. A previous kiss that had escaped company censure made front pages across the world and gained a new gay audience for some comic shops.

With **The Authority**'s repetitive use of urban mass destruction throughout its run, it was inevitable that it would gain increased attention after the events of September 11. **The Authority Widescreen Special** was postponed. Artist Bryan Hitch requested this, deeming the large scale destruction inside unsuitable for publication at the time. What he did not request was that the book should eventually be cancelled altogether.

Then the much delayed final issues of Mark Millar's run were postponed due to changes DC decided needed to be made to the artwork. A few brows were furrowed - the issues in question had reportedly not involved mass destruction, but other more disturbing one-on-one scenes. It was then announced that the team to relaunch **The Authority** in 2002, Brian Azzarello and Steve Dillon, were dropping out owing to concerns Azzarello now had about his storyline. No replacements were mentioned.

What also seemed curious is that **The Authority** was singled out for more attention than other titles in DC's stable. **JLA: Haven**, released a few months later, was not delayed, despite including a scene where an alien spaceship crash landed in California, killing thousands.

Something was up.

The word started to get out that the effective cancellation of **The Authority** was not down to the events of September 11 at all; these just provided a cover story. It soon became clear that it was the general attitude of the book that was causing problems; it scorned the values that DC promoted within its DC Universe titles. Oh, and Midnighter and Apollo were a practising homosexual couple - and based on DC's two main properties, Batman and Superman.

A few years ago, it was made clear to DC that others within Warner Brothers thought they could exploit Batman and Superman better than them. Ted Turner's links to Cartoon Network inspired him to call on Warner Brothers to move those properties across their portfolios, away from DC. While this move was unsuccessful, it planted the thought in DC's mind that their biggest cash cows *could* be taken away. Hence the increase in multimedia projects and high profile uses of the characters - and a big frown on anything that might be seen to portray them in a negative light.

It's particularly galling that DC would take this decision about **The Authority** over such a matter when it has prominent gay, lesbian and bisexual employees, both editorial and freelance. But it's far more chilling that it'd use events that shocked the world as an excuse to get rid of a particular thorn in its side.

Currently DC plans to let Mark Millar finish his run on the book (albeit in a diluted version). A proposed Garth Ennis two-parter is now to be drawn by Glenn Fabry as a one-off, to be published sometime in 2002. After that **The Authority**'s future as an ongoing monthly comic seems as likely as *The New Adventures Of Hitler* being updated, guest starring Osama Bin Laden, and published by Archie. BL

Click on Globe returns to contents

COMICS MILESTONES

Mike Kidson continues his exploration of key moments in the history of comicbooks

Decoding the comics

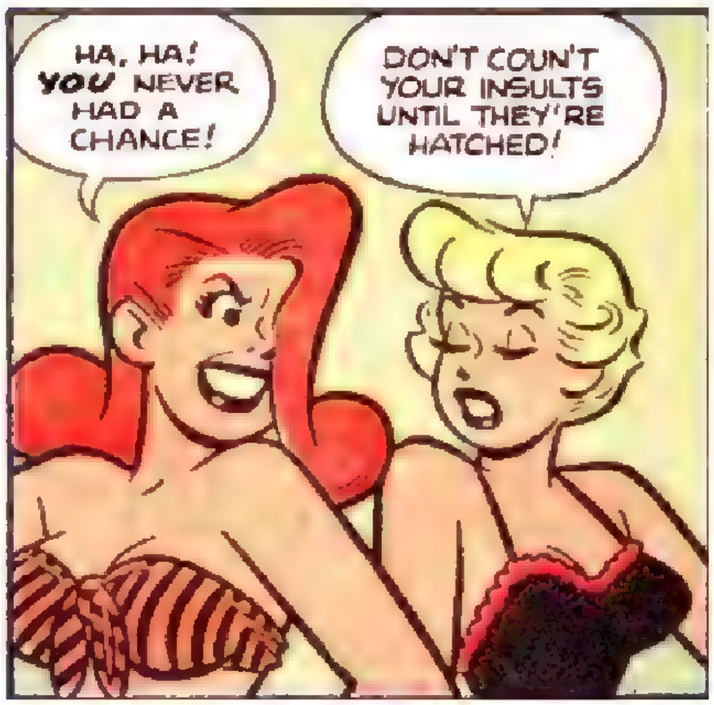
FREDRIC WERTHAM is undoubtedly the single most hated man in the history of American comics. Full details of his background may be found in an excellent 1987 essay by Dwight Dwecker, online at *http://art-bin.com/art/awertham.html*; suffice it to say here that he was a Freudian psychiatrist to whose New York clinic criminals were regularly referred and who, during the 1940s, became convinced that constant exposure of children to mass media, especially comicbooks, was likely to cause delinquent tendencies and to harden them into criminal behaviour. He was not alone in that conviction – almost none of the pioneers of media criticism in the late 1940s could stomach the comicbooks. But he was their most prominent and outspoken critic, an "expert witness" whose bestselling book Seduction of the Innocent (SOTI, Rinehart & Co., 1953) attacked the medium in a way which was highly plausible to the general public, and instigated significant changes in the industry. In Comics Between the Panels (Dark Horse, 1998), Mike Richardson and Steve Duin described Wertham as having forced American comics to start all over again. He died 20 years ago last month. Does the effect he had on the comicbooks still live on?

The short answer is yes, it does. Probably the clearest and most detailed summary of Wertham's criticisms is the original version of the Comics Code, the code of practice drawn up by a number of leading comicbook publishers following a massive public reaction against the medium spurred by SOTI and by a televised Congressional investigation, and applied as of Spring 1955. Wertham, unconcerned with genre, characterised as a "crime comic" any story which depicted criminal activity; the first and longest section of the Code bans explicit depiction of crime and criminal methods, asserts that good must always triumph over evil and restricts even the *use* of the word "crime". The horror comics had come under particular attack, so section B of the Code effectively banned all forms of traditional horror in just five sweeping clauses. Vulgar and slangy dialogue was strongly discouraged, a section on costume prohibited provocative or anatomically exaggerated depictions of women. Sex, while not banned outright, was hedged in with all sorts of restrictions, and advertising of weapons, gambling equipment and quack remedies was proscribed. Altogether, the letter of Wertham's critiques was embodied in a document that the comics publishers hoped would reassure parents and keep the industry in business; an independent magistrate was appointed to scan each comic for Code approval, which would reassure distributors that the product was saleable.

Sexual stimulation by combining "headlights" with the sadist's dream of tying up a woman.

Above: Wertham's own demonstration of unacceptable female depiction in comicbooks.

In the long term, everyone involved lost, Wertham included. All along he had lobbied for Federal control of comicbooks; he placed no faith in the industry's ability to monitor itself (although in fact his fears on that score proved groundless). Furthermore, the



DON'T YOU WORRY ABOUT A THING, MILLIE DEAR! NO MATTER HOW ANGRY CLICKER IS WITH YOU, I'LL TRY TO KEEP HIM FROM GOING OUT WITH OTHER GIRLS!
HUH?

Marvel's humour characters Millie and Chili before the Code (1953) ... and after the Code (1956)

Click on Globe returns to contents

SUPERMAN'S GIRL FRIEND
LOIS LANE
52 BIG pages
25¢
SUPERHUMBRE! MISS LOIS LENT HOURS AGO!
SUPERMAN! COME BACK! DON'T LET THEM DO THIS TO ME
ROSE AND THE THORN IN BATTLE OF THE THORNS!

By 1972 the Code Authority was approving highly suggestive covers. Just follow the sight lines...

SUPERMAN'S GIRL FRIEND
LOIS LANE
52 BIG pages
25¢
SUPERMAN - STOP HIM FROM PLAYING
LOIS & THE VENUS FIGHT TOGETHER TO FILL 77 COFFINS!

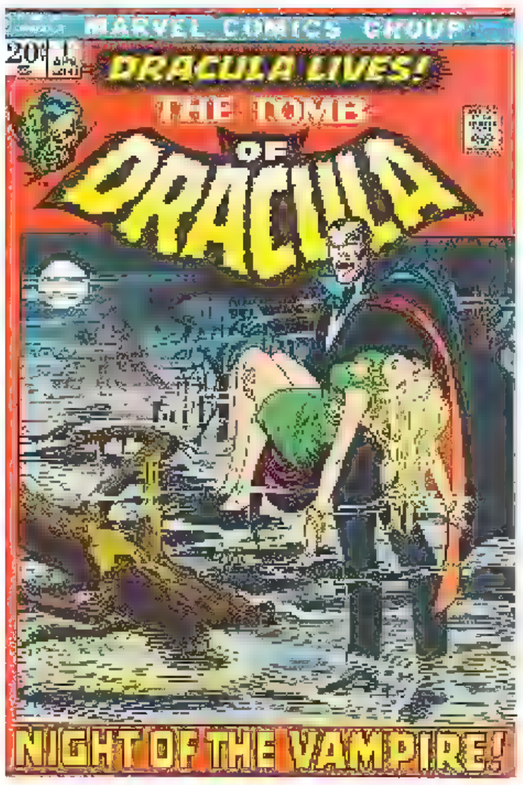
Code embodied the *letter* of his criticisms in a literal fashion which missed their spirit; machine gun-toting, woman-slapping gangsters and comicbooks with crime themes disappeared, but crimes continued to be depicted, in however sanitised a fashion. To Wertham the Code was not a cure - it was a cover up.

Still, the comics industry fared far worse. Wertham's simplistic "monkey see, monkey do" model of analysis, which focused solely on how children might emulate content and not at all on how readers might perceive variations in quality, context or narrative purpose, failed to take into account the industry's slow but sure move towards maturity during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The Code imposed that same simplistic mode of analysis, and as a result re-aligned, for kids only, a medium which had been read by many adults. Its impact went far beyond the crime and horror titles; nervous editors instructed artists of teen humour titles to avoid any hint of décolletage on female characters, combatants in war comics and westerns might be bruised and battered but *never* bloody, the once powerful romance genre moved away from marital problems to describe teenage courtship rituals... if the more obvious excrescences of the comicbooks were removed, everything else was gutted too. That any kind of quality control was maintained was due only to

Censorship leaves lasting scars – and the scar borne by the mainstream American industry.

the controversy having driven many publishers out of the business, together with most of the worst - and some of the finest - creators; the surviving companies were able to cherry pick from those who remained.

As the industry abruptly shifted from gritty realism for an older readership to anodyne fantasy for childen, the superheroes began to make a return. In retrospect it was a canny move: DC already had a stack of superhero names trademarked and, despite Wertham's suggestions that the genre was perverse, superheroes had not been his primary target, having all but vanished in the post-war years during which he researched the comicbooks. There was nothing in the Code to proscribe heroic fantasy, few would imagine that children could emulate super-feats, and the characteristic sexless superhero costume conformed to the Code's standards of decency while allowing artists to draw the human body. So old characters were overhauled and represented in slick, modern art styles - and the American mainstream comics industry began to forge its own identity again.



In 1972 the Code Authority approved Marvel's Tomb of Dracula. From the Comics Code Part B clause 5: "Scenes dealing with ... vampires and vampirism ... are prohibited."

But it never grew up. It still hasn't grown up. Censorship leaves lasting scars - and the scar borne by the mainstream American industry, and by the Code-resenting fans who, over the years, came to make up its personnel, is an apparently unshakeable belief that Being Mature – Contravening The Code. That mindset is all too evident even today; in spite of the fact that the Code has been a toothless paper tiger for more than three decades, gleeful and iconoclastic excess is paraded as welcome innovation, as mature, groundbreaking work.

No Code? Wahey! Image is busting out all over!

This syndrome emerged, almost unnoticed, in the late 1960s. A reference to drug-taking – a criminal activity – in 1971's Amazing Spider-Man #96-98 caused the Code Authority to refuse approval; the comics were published anyway, and distributors, retailers and readers barely noticed the fuss. But by then the Code supervisors were obliviously passing all kinds of proscribed things - DC's revival of horror comics, albeit mild ones, late in 1967 had been a major watershed, both in terms of the Code Authority's weakness and as an example of the industry's compulsion to innovate by pushing at the boundaries of the Code. Within

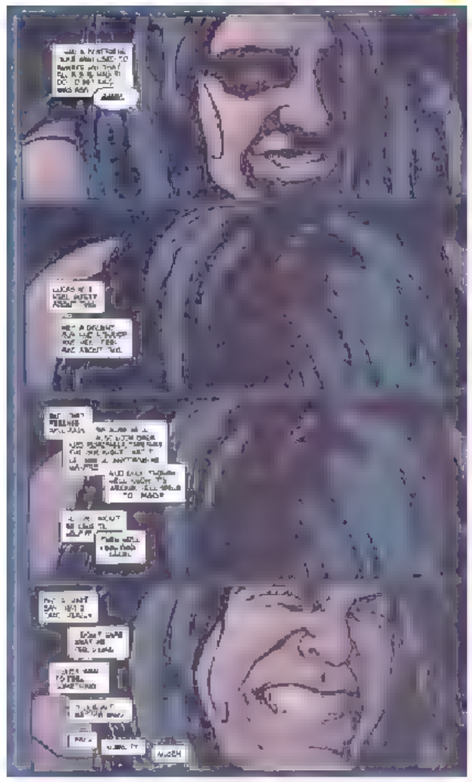
Click on Globe returns to contents

months of that Spider-Man incident the Code Authority was cheerfully giving the green light to Marvel's Tomb of Dracula - depiction of vampirism was specifically banned by the Code – and DC was running a series of Lois Lane covers packed with sly, Freudian symbology which made Wertham's examples of female depiction look very innocent. Clearly the Code had lost control, and almost anything was permissible.

But the surviving major publishers *still* continued to submit their books for Code approval. So the ensuing generations of creators *still* pushed its boundaries - and few indeed looked beyond them. The rise of the direct market, bypassing the magazine distributors whom the Code symbol was intended to reassure, spurred the indie publishing boom of the 1980s; on the good side, creators' rights became an issue, but on the bad side too many of the resulting titles were just the same mainstream genre material… with more nudity, more sex, more swearing and more gore. At the start of the 1990s the founders of Image Comics revelled in their freedom from the Code, to draw balloon-breasted, skimpily-clad women, extreme violence and lots of gore. In 2001 Marvel proclaimed from the rooftops, to readers many of whom must have been barely aware of what they were talking about, its secession from the Comics Code, and set up its new Mature Marvel Max line.

The contents? More sex, more swearing, more violence, more gore. Characteristics of the mature human adult? More like signs of a mainstream publisher joyously kicking the Code in the ribs once again, apparently oblivious to the fact that it's been dead for a long time...

And so, 50 years after Wertham was campaigning to clean up the comicbooks, 20 years after his death, the American mainstream is still shadow boxing with him. It's a legacy he would not have wanted. It's a legacy that US comics need to cast aside once and for all if it ever wishes to become truly mature. BL



2001, and Marvel's new Mature Readers imprint still confuses maturity with Code contravention.

BORDERLINKS

seanmckeever.com
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MARVEL.COM

Silver Bullet Comics

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ADVERTISE IN BORDERLINE:

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£100 ($145)
¼ page - 135mm x 92mm
or 67mm x 190mm
£55 ($85)
1/5 page - 50mm x 190mm
£45 ($70)
Display Classifieds:
50mm x 90mm £25 ($40)
50mm x 40mm £15 ($25)
Banner - 10mm x 275mm £30 ($45)
BL Gold - Cover banner (15mm x 280mm) + ½ page advert
£350 ($500)
contact Phil Hall (details page 2)

COMIC BOOK CONFESSIONAL:

I Lost My Girl to Vertigo Comics

"I MET Polly five years ago at a Neil Gaiman book signing at Amazon.com. We had a deep, almost transcendent rapport at first sight and within an hour had moved in together. Our mutual love of **The Sandman** gave our relationship a unique bond, and from the very beginning we incorporated themes from The Dreaming into our intimate moments. We'd read aloud alternate panels from the Good Book to get ourselves in the mood, then let our identities dissolve and imagine we were characters like Dream, Death, Desire & Delirium. I'm no bragger, but our lovemaking was Endless in more ways than one! Before long, we'd turned our bedroom into a sort of micro-Dreaming, using candles, layers of crushed velvet and those self-adhesive glow-in-the-dark stars you can stick on the ceiling. We even found additional members of The Endless amongst the fittings and fixtures in our bedroom, including Duvet, Divan and Dunlopillow.

"About two years into our relationship Polly began acting strangely. She'd return from visits to the local comic shop acting fidgety and suspicious. At first I thought it was post-Millennial Tension, or that maybe one of her translucent crystals was running low on orgone energy. Nothing could have prepared me for the hideous truth.

"One night, as I lay in bed eagerly anticipating another night of Gaiman-themed role-playing bliss, she pounced on me wearing a sinister looking black and green striped jersey. "I can turn my fist into solid sand!" she roared, before savagely hitting me about the face and neck.

"After that, things were really crap." *Noel Monnt*

Click on Globe returns to contents

THE NORM

MICHAEL JANTZE is not satisfied with merely producing an internationally syndicated newspaper strip; he's branched out into the worlds of self-publishing, and is using the Internet to spread the word and generate reader feedback. Borderline's Steve Miller looks at this Internet success...

WHILST at California State University in the Eighties, Jantze created a strip called **Normal U.S.A**. Partly a funny animal strip, partly a riff on relationships, it was, according to the author, inspired by **Bloom County**, **Pogo** and **Doonesbury**. Jantze later published the strip as a book but when he attempted to get it syndicated, he had to make so many compromises that the strip didn't work. As he says, "I took it out back and shot it."

After this, Jantze worked in journalism, but he found he was "sitting in meetings with starched white shirts doodling my dreams on the margins of the daily news budget". Subsequent to this, Jantze started seriously cartooning again. By now he had started to work on **The Norm**, and an early version of this strip was printed for a year in a Marin County newspaper, the *Marin Independent Journal*.

"When I interviewed at the *Journal*, I told them I was only interested in the job if they'd run my comic strip in the paper - when it was ready. The two editors that allowed me to do that were great... I don't think they really understood what I was demanding, but they said okay. I knew if I could find some idiot - er, editor - to run the strip for a while, I'd work the kinks out on my own."

The Norm debuted in the *Journal* in August 1995, while Jantze worked on a version that he could submit for syndication. This early template is noticeably rougher than the syndicated version, but most of the primary ingredients such as Norm and the supporting cast are there. Also present in the early version is Norm's trademark "talking to the reader".

The first daily syndicated **The Norm** appeared on 12 August 1996, syndicated via King Features.

"Most syndicates feel there's a window of opportunity for any comic strip. They 'launch' with an initial sales campaign and then do about six months of follow up. After that, it's up to editors to kind of find the strip in their slush pile. **The Norm** runs in about 75 papers worldwide. That includes Canada, Malaysia, Estonia, Pakistan, etc. Of course **The Norm** is in neither my hometown paper nor my local paper. But I get to Pakistan once a week, so I read it there."

> *"...the feedback from the syndicate was that the strip was too 'smart'".*

The Norm revolves around the life of a twenty-something graphic designer, the titular Norm. He has two best friends; Reine, a girl whom he has known since school, and Ford, a male work colleague. They play basketball, they watch films, they surf the Internet at work and they try to avoid visiting their parents. Apart from his boundless optimism, Norm's a pretty normal guy. There are two major reasons that set the strip apart from other comics you read in the paper.

The first is this - it's funny. Every day. The general mechanism of the strip is that Norm talks to the camera, addressing the reader directly. Jantze's obviously a very skilled writer; he delights in setting up a gag in the first three panels, to deliver the killer blow in the fourth. Norm is a master of comic timing.

The second reason - it's superbly drawn. There are too many comic strips in papers today that look as though anybody could have drawn them. **The Norm** doesn't. Jantze's style is graceful, with a confident use of inks, and a great awareness of the visual medium. Added to this, his characters look both new and traditional at the same time, with a visual style that has direct antecedents in **Peanuts** and **Calvin & Hobbes**.

"I think the more I draw my strip, the more I've been pulled back to the elements that work best for comics. To be honest, when I started the strip, I wanted to draw the 'anti-strip'. I wanted to break all kinds of comic strip rules and really push the envelope of what a comic strip could be – or, more exactly, what a comic strip could do. It was a fun phase, but comics are meant to be read. And the feedback from the syndicate was that the strip was too 'smart'.

"I like coming out with a surprise in the fourth panel. I do enjoy that. What I find restrictive is where I can go in the strip. What's allowed in newspapers. And how I can do it. What I can show. **The Norm** was never meant to be an 'edgy' strip, but I can't even talk about things people talk about most… sexuality, sex, violence, etc. It's all around us... but not in comic strips. And if you do touch on the subject, you have to be so damn serious. There's no better way to deal with *any* problem than with humour. But newspaper editors ask us not to do what we do best."

Earlier this year, Jantze ran a poll to gather feedback from readers as to whether Norm should have a more permanent love interest in his life. The readers suggested *en masse* that Norm should hook up

Click on Globe returns to contents

with Reine, and such a story is currently developing, although Jantze denies that this was done in direct response to the poll.

"The poll was a poll. I was interested in hearing what people thought about Norm's old relationships. I got an earful, for sure. I did the poll because I had noticed people were really into Norm moving along in his life. Are Norm and Reine meant to be together? I think so. I don't know when, but the secret origin of Reine's name (and the dubious spelling) is it's my wife's middle name. You figure it out, you know? Oh...and Reine pronounces it "reNAY".

The poll was carried out through Jantze's website, *www.thenorm.com* Once there, fans can view archive collections of the various strips, current dailies and Sundays, and articles explaining the method behind the creation of an individual strip. Jantze obviously values feedback from his readers, and the website enables him to receive it more quickly and in much more quantity than by traditional means. There is also a message board where Jantze has been known to respond to questions about current storylines, and he occasionally takes part in a Sunday evening chat session.

Jantze has also self published collections of the daily strips. Subscribe to a year's worth of strips, and you receive an A5 zine every three months, then at the end of the year you get a slipcase to store that year's strips in. It's a great format; it's attractive, it looks good on the shelf, and it's easy to lend to your friends, one of the reasons Jantze came up with it.

"I was tired of the collections that American book publishers were putting out and the general lack of attention the books are given by both the publishing company and the booksellers. I decided to self-publish to offer readers something they could pass along to a friend. I decided to do box sets because I wanted to distinguish the collection from all the others. To say, 'look, something different'. Let me tell you, when the box sets does end up on a shelf next to other comic collections, it's one of the first things people pick up.

"I'm not against traditional publishing. I just didn't want to receive a $2000 advance royalty check and some comped books and for that to be the end of the effort. So we've been testing the success of the book online at The Norm Store (*http://store.yahoo.com/the-norm*) and at Amazon. com. We're moving slowly into comic shops and after a year of that, we might look to distributing to bookstores. But I'm a cartoonist first, I really would rather have someone come along and help out with the effort."

In October, issue 0 of **The Norm Magazine** was solicited and should still be available at comic shops, as well as through the online store. It contains a collection of older strips that predate the collections, together with some extra art linking the strips together. It's very much an experiment, and Jantze realises that he's going to have to work on the format if he's going to make it work.

"**The Norm Magazine** is an experiment in format. What I'd like to do is offer some new storylines as well as collect strips sequentially. So the story in the premiere issue tries a format of blending strips by theme with some new artwork. It kind of works, I'm not sure it's something readers would really find a lot of value in. So I'm still thinking about the magazine comic book and how to approach it."

As to the website, Jantze's recently launched a subscription service to help him fund the new features that he's keen to develop. Jantze also wants to start delivering the strip daily via email. Regarding the daily strip, he plans to move that along from the serial format that it's had for much of this year.

"The subscriber service for The Norm.com (*www.thenorm.com*) was meant to help pay for some of the fun ideas I'd like to implement. It's been a success so far. One of the new features will be email delivery. We have a beta going now (your readers can send an email to *subscriptions@molbe.com* to be a part of the beta test). And in November I'll be launching an advice column for readers at *www.thenorm.com/advice/index.html*.

"The future of the strip is about change. I'm done with the single guy thing. Norm and Reine's relationship will be maturing in 2002. And I'll be getting back to more of a gag-a-day format by 2002 as well. The story arc that has run this year has served its purpose and it's time to let the strip grow with it's readers. I'm excited about this new phase."

Whatever Jantze throws at Norm over the next year, you can bet that it'll be eventful, enjoyable and plain funny. It's a daily strip that you should be reading, so get along to the website and tell them **Borderline** sent you. BL

I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU DON'T TALK WITH FORD ABOUT HIS WEDDING.
WE TALK ABOUT IT!
LET'S SEE, IT GOES SOMETHING LIKE THIS: I SAY, "SO, YOU'RE GETTING MARRIED?"
AND HE REPLIES, "THAT'S WHAT THEY TELL ME." THEN WE TALK ABOUT BEER OR SPORTS.
©2001 Michael Jantze Distributed by KFS, Inc. http://www.thenorm.com

Click on Globe returns to contents

LAST issue, two men who have known each other for over ten years but who have never actually met started a conversation via e-mail. The men are Borderline editor Phil Hall and Marvel Comics writer Fabian Nicieza. Having covered Nicieza's early career at Marvel and his opinion of Marvel editorial at that time, the conversation now continues...

BL: Valiant... How did you get the job?
FN: Steve Massarsky asked if I would work under Bob Layton, doing much of the de facto work of an EIC. I thanked him but turned it down. I expected the "Marvelution" would have resulted in some important opportunities for me at Marvel, but it didn't. A year later, Steve called and offered me the gig whole and I took it. I wanted the experience more than anything. I wanted the opportunity to learn and try to take something that was down and build it up again.

Not to disparage *anyone* before me, since we were *all* swimming against the current back then, but the company's titles and publishing program were not stimulating anymore. They had become stagnant. They had burned a lot of bridges with consumers and retailers. It was nearly an impossible task. Then again, I'm the guy who only accepted a Marvel editorial assignment when I was offered the Star line, so... obviously I'm a masochist.

BL: A lot of the stuff you put together at Valiant was bloody innovative and refreshing (Quantum & Woody, Troublemakers, Trinity Angels). Does it annoy you that this was the right thing at the wrong time?
FN: Not really. What can you do? We did some very good books and some very average books. We didn't do too many out and out stinkers. We hoped quality and word of mouth would help build the new foundation, but it didn't.

BL: Did you run it like a sort of Marvel with a semi-creator-owned ethos?
FN: No, it was company-owned properties, but I tried very hard for a better creator rights package. I thought I had hammered it out pretty well, but from what I have learned after the fact, that was getting sabotaged in legal paperwork and red tape behind my back at positions higher than my own.

BL: I ask that because I got the impression that the people who created your titles for you (Christopher Priest and Marc Bright specifically) wrote them with a feeling that beat the crap out of most of the other comics at the time.
FN: Well, our editors were told to let them do their jobs with a minimum of interference. Help your writer attain what they are trying to say. Isn't that how it's supposed to work? Why the hell else hire a writer unless you want them to write the work? An editor's job should not be to dictate, but to support and enhance. Inevitably, the best company comics - qualitatively - are the ones with editors who understand that.

> *"...I ended up unconscious in a Men's Room stall."*

Now naturally, that motto will only work as an application depending on the work you receive. No one could look at the work Priest was doing on Quantum & Woody and say, "We need to do this or that." Conversely, when we had problems in the direction other titles were taking, the editors became more involved.

It's not a science or a math formula that comes out the same everytime. It's trial and error.

BL: Would you like to see someone pick up the Valiant titles, or would you maybe like to revisit Troublemakers one day?
FN: Not Troublemakers. I'm beyond that particular kind of book right now. I wanted to create a bridge between an older reader, over 30, and a younger one, under 10. I think for the most part, Troublemakers did that. But I don't have that particular muse lighting a fire under me right now, so I see no reason to revisit it.

I do still miss writing Turok, though. I could have written that one for 10 years before remotely exhausting the well of ideas or interest in the character.

BL: Tell me what it was like at Valiant and how it went wrong?
FN: Uhm... take your pick or mix and match. We didn't sell enough copies to make a profit? The parent company could no longer be expected to finance a division that couldn't support itself? Our efforts to expand our market base with non-superhero genre material to bookstores and national sales venues were woefully ill prepared and understaffed, although the product was excellent? We allied ourselves with a national distribution partner for that product who, in essence, destroyed any opportunity we had for success? The comics industry preferred not to give us a chance no matter how good or bad the new books were (and many were quite good)? The corporate parent failed to capitalize on the opportunities presented for "corporate synergy" regarding comics properties, video games and licensing

Click on Globe returns to contents

We never said he was normal... With daughter and plastic hats! Below right: Deodato's Citizen V cover!

extrapolation into film, tv, toys, etc?

Maybe some of that had something to do with it...

BL: Star Comics, that was it, I knew you'd been on editorial at some point around the NewU. Now... what was that like?

FN: It was both a blast and a burden. Editing is a spiritually debilitating job. You are Sisyphus, eternally pushing that damned rock and every single freelancer alive only exists to make your job harder! Now combine that cheery thought with an outside licensor having approval of every stage of the creative process, and you can imagine how cheery it could get!

That being said, I worked with some *great* assistant editors - Evan Skolnick and Carlos Lopez; I worked with some great interns, several of which got jobs on staff after their internships had ended. I worked with some great freelancers - and even some nice licensing people. We put out some excellent material, including Ren & Stimpy, Barbie and Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventures. We put out some fun books that made my life interesting, like William Shatner's Tekworld and Darkman. I got to meet fun folks like William Shatner, Sam Raimi and James Cameron.

Even the horrific experiences of titles such as Camp Candy or Hook were fun in hindsight. It gives you a lot of "editorial battle stories" to talk about in the foxholes. It also gave me wonderful experience in learning how to deal with outside companies, how to use my enormous powers of persuasion to get them off our backs and try to fight for quality every step of the way.

BL: There are a number of people who are giving you some of the credit for the rejuvenation of the Justice League. Your Midsummer's Nightmare series with Mark Waid and Jeff Johnson set the scene for Grant Morrison's complete overhaul. Many felt that you laid the groundwork for Morrison - but was this an editorially led story, or did you and Mark just work on revamping the theme, which led to the way JLA eventually went?

FN: As I recall, because of his busy schedule Mark suggested I co-write with him. Our editorial fiat was to put the Seven together. Mark and I both bounced ideas off each other to the point where the plot structure was pretty much half-and-half. I brought the idea of a de-powered League watching a fake League and a world of superhumans around them. I brought in the idea of Know Man, a "bigger" villain with "bigger" motivations to his actions. Mark brought in almost all of the individual character touches and the story-linking use of Dr. Destiny. The majority of the script was Mark's work. Very little of the finished dialogue was mine.

In hindsight, I wish that DC had approved our original publishing program, which was 2 larger bookend issues and 4 regular sized issues in between. We literally cut out like 100 pages of concept material! Most of it dealt with fleshing out the "ersatz" League, which would have not only allowed us to create some interesting new villains for the DCU, but also would have allowed us to reflect quite a bit thematically on the real heroes through our study of the fake ones.

Geez, I still have truckloads of notes, backstory and story material for nearly every one of those fake Leaguers, including Know Man. Sigh. Overall, I think we accomplished what was asked of us. We set up Grant's work. We gave the Seven a reason to come together and I got to write words into the mouths of some of DC's greatest heroes. Win/win, baby!

Any chance to write Superman, *ever*, I'll take it. If they asked me to write back-copy for Superman 7-Eleven cups, I'd do it. I'm a geek for that kooky Kryptonian. Eddie Berganza knows it, but refuses to throw me a bone! Yet...

BL: Why aren't you part of Joey da Q's new Marvel set up?

FN: In what way? Internally? On staff? I think Joe and Bill both feel I would be far more of a hindrance to them than a help. I also don't know that they need my voice in the editorial department. Maybe in other departments, but not editorial. I think Joe's got a pretty strong grip on that.

BL: To industry insiders the fact that you worked with him on the Event books seemed to make you an obvious choice as one of his colonels.

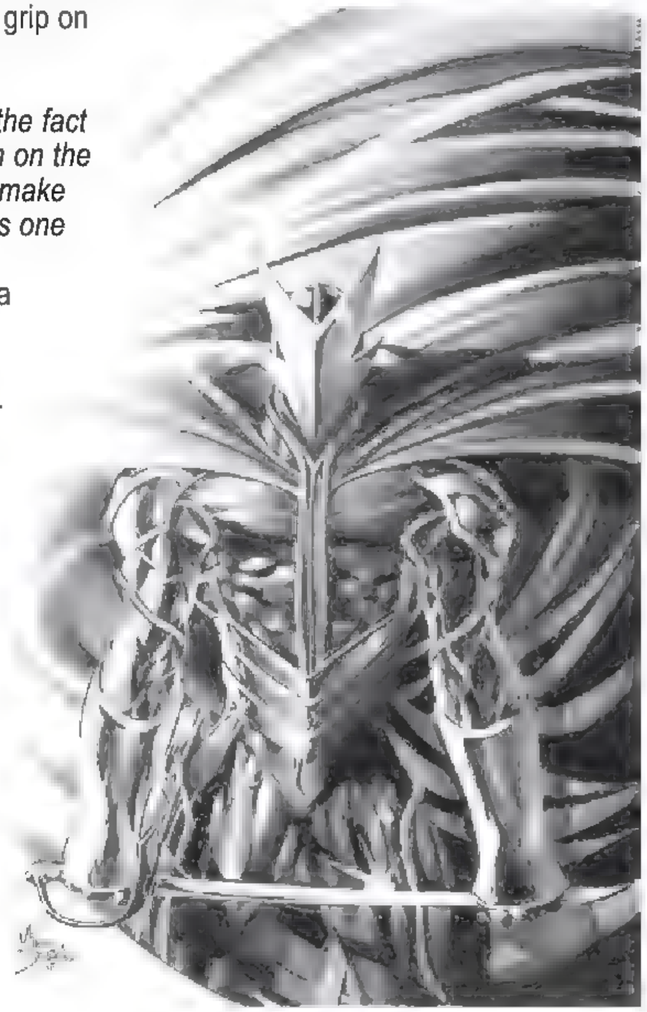
FN: Well, it's hard to be a colonel in a larger army after you've been the general of a smaller one. ☺

I would never say never to the possibility of being a general in a company's "army," because I'm always open to new opportunities, but at Marvel, at this time, I don't know if they need what I bring to the table for their editorial department.

In the last decade I have bounced back and forth between staff jobs and freelance writing depending on my "life place." I do miss the social interaction of a nine-to-five job, but on the other hand, I like not having to shower until noon and wearing sweats and a t-shirt all day long! ☺

BL: And while we're on the subject of "new" Marvel, what are your thoughts on the subject?

FN: I think they've done a lot - and I mean a *lot* - of excellent things in just one year to shake themselves up and, more importantly, to shake the perception among the creative community of who they are and what they do. Most importantly, they quickly returned a very strong



Click on Globe returns to contents

definition to the Spider-Man titles and have at the very least helped shore up one of the core X-books. They are looking to improve the core MU titles like Captain America and Iron Man. And have smartly ignored the titles that don't need to be tinkered with, oh, say, like Avengers and Thunderbolts! ☺

I may not agree with all of their individual choices, but your mileage *should* vary - that means you're diversifying your publishing program. I also think they are prone to placing "hot name" over sales, track records or even substance in some cases. But overall, I do think they have navigated a very tricky course in the last year and they've done a very, very good job of it.

Hell, having been someone who had internally tried - and failed - to convince the company to do a mature readers' line of Marvel titles, I applaud how quickly and easily the current regime turned that around. Now maybe if they could put out a few books that actually qualify as mature content, it would really be even better.

BL: For the benefit of those readers who aren't familiar with your current comic, Thunderbolts, how would you best describe the series?
FN: Simple: it is about former habitual supervillains trying to become superheroes. But it isn't so simple after all, because who you are is as much self-perception as outside perception. What you do can be misinterpreted depending on individual viewpoints. Why you are doing it can be called into question in these skeptical times. Even how you do it is subject to close examination.

It is a wonderful simmering stew of redemption, perpetual failure, and heroic endeavor. It is steeped in all the good things about continuity - enriching history, that helps to establish setting, create conflict and turmoil, as well as providing our characters with a sense of having gnawed on life for a while.

It is also a turnaround of many standard superhero clichés, including examinations into why heroes do what they do, playing around with every conceivable permutation of the secret identity and also having fun with the concept of villainous deaths and perpetual resurrections.

"...you just mention his name and I have to grind my teeth in anger."

BL: How has it moved on from Kurt Busiek's original concept?
FN: I don't believe the book's themes have changed - it is still about the search for redemption, both public and personal. It's still about "switching identities" in order to "find yourself," and our characters sure keep doing that a whole bunch! It's still about mystery and honor and playing in the fun and unfairly maligned sandbox that is Marvel continuity. I think Kurt and I agree 100% on the themes, we just handle the structure of our individual stories a bit differently.

BL: In what ways do you think the series has progressed since you took over from Kurt? And why do you think it has stayed so solid in the sales chart despite your different approach?
FN: Well, I think Kurt's strength was in a more leisurely approach to the plotting and pacing. It worked very well for his three years on the book. Both from my preference and my editor's request, when I took over, I "kicked it up a notch." I plan to slow down here and there after issue #60 for some more careful examinations of character, but during my two years I've tried to maintain a certain razor's edge adrenaline surge.

As a reader, I really enjoyed the hell out of the book before Tom [Brevoort] asked me to take it on. As a writer, I haven't had this much fun since Turok and New Warriors.

I think it's maintained a steady, if not spectacular, spot on the sales chart throughout its five years because it's a very good book that provides a mainstream Marvel superhero reader with a very entertaining look at a specific segment of the Marvel Universe. And mind you, we've accomplished all of this with barely *any* support. The day T-Bolts gets a dot.comic or another house ad in a Marvel title (we got one for #39) or, Heaven forbid, an article in Wizard, is the day I do a Snoopy Happy Dance in my boxer shorts. The book has succeeded because it has a very specific point of view, a villain's point of view, one that is quite different than that of any other title available. It was an excellent book for Kurt's three year run and I think it's been a good book for my two year run. And knowing what we have planned, I also think it's going to get even better in the next two years!

BL: You once said, "In true Tbolts tradition, everything will change, but everything will stay the same". That was a year ago. Do you feel this still holds true and what are your plans for the title?
FN: Actually, since I'm plotting issue #64 next and I know the big shake-ups coming up in #60, I'd have to say that it holds true even *more* now. All of us - Kurt, Tom and I - have continued to find very appropriate and entertaining ways to shake up the status quo of the title once a year or so in ways that average monthly titles don't do more than once every 10 years! Tom has told me one of the book's strengths is that if you go away for a year, you

Click on Globe returns to contents

might come back to something *completely* unexpected. How many mainstream superhero titles can you honestly say that about? Well, the arc we plan from #60 through #75 will not only continue in that tradition, it'll give it an even stronger kick in the ass.

BL: Is it true that Fabian Nicieza and Kurt Busiek "gambled" for who got to use Hawkeye in a card game, which was how Hawkeye ended up in the Tbolts and not the Avengers?
FN: Actually, it involved shots of tequila and beer chasers. I both won and I lost, since I ended up unconscious in a Men's Room stall. Kurt just wound up with a tie around his head and his shirt unbuttoned to his belly. Hmm, maybe I was better off unconscious...

BL: There's been a noticeable lack of old New Warriors characters that you either created or developed in Tbolts - considering that some of them (especially here, I'm thinking of Justice, with his manslaughter past) are prime candidates for the redemption ticket, have you made a deliberate point of leaving them in the past to concentrate on new characters?
FN: Well, yes and no. It is deliberate in that I wouldn't feel comfortable writing New Warriors again unless I were actually writing New Warriors again, if you know what I mean. I am not totally averse to using them as guest stars in a story, I just haven't found the opportunity to use them properly within the context of what I have written. There has been no appropriate application for their use in Gambit or Tbolts that would have been anything but an obligatory shoehorned guest shot. I'd rather use them when the story demands it specifically be them that I use.

Tom recently asked me for a new project proposal. Within the project's proposed first year's worth of stories I had the Warriors involved in a couple of them because it was appropriate to the character I was pitching.

So, never say never but always say, "We'll See."

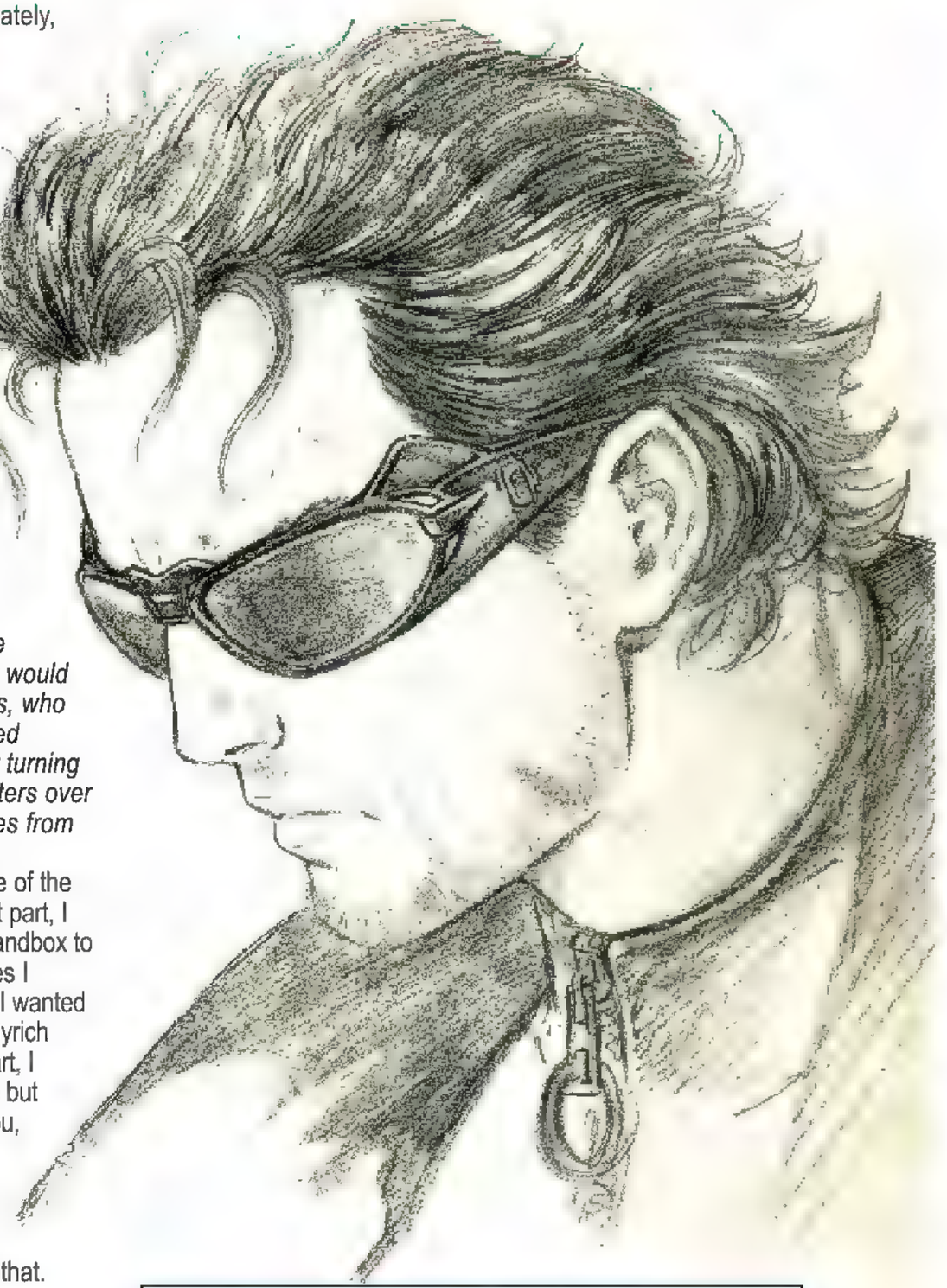
"...Nomad remains my favorite character to write."

BL: I'm finding the differences between Moonstone and Songbird one of the most intriguing elements of the book. My reading of it is that Moonstone is capable of reforming if she chose to, but doesn't want to (and is therefore genuinely evil, in that she chooses to do wrong), whereas Songbird would prefer to be good but seems to be psychologically incapable of doing so (hence her brainwashing, kleptomania etc.). Is this how you intended to portray them, and under the circumstances, which one would you consider to be the most irredeemable?
FN: Well, you have to tip the hat to Kurt because he totally defined Songbird while he'd tip his hat to Roger Stern who totally defined Moonstone. I am just (I hope) continuing the characterizations they developed. Each T-Bolt has an inherent flaw - obviously, or else they wouldn't have become villains to begin with. Exploring the different aspects of their motivations and capacities for good and evil is the most fun.

I would have to say, ultimately, and not just because of her appearance in Avengers Forever, that Songbird has the greater capacity for redemption specifically for the reasons you cite. Moonstone chooses to do evil more often than she chooses to do good. Will that trend continue? We'll see.

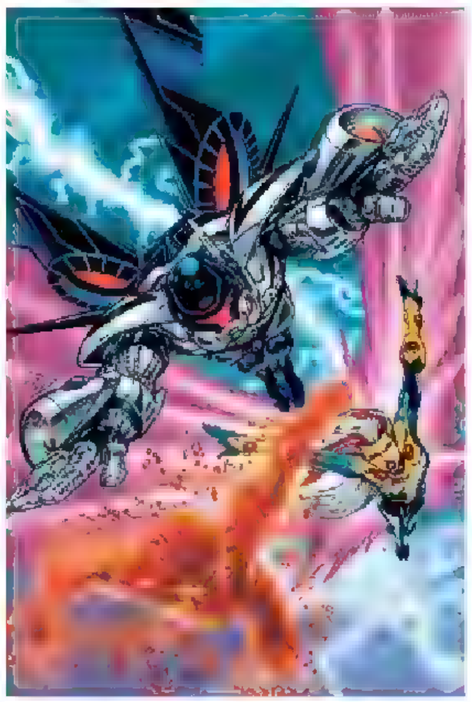
BL: The Tbolts have a long Marvel pedigree, but before Tbolts started most of them would have been considered throwaway characters. Do you get more freedom with them than you would have with, say, the Avengers, who can't be killed/maimed/altered permanently? Do you prefer turning them into interesting characters over creating completely new ones from scratch?
FN: Oh, absolutely. That's one of the joys of the book. For the most part, I can toss toys around in the sandbox to my heart's content. Sometimes I haven't been able to do what I wanted to - such was the case with Gyrich post-#50 - but for the most part, I work in a wonderful "separate but equal" capacity. Let me tell you, after a few years in the X-universe, it's one hell of a pleasure to have a certain amount of creative freedom and an editor who will support that.

BL: Was the Humus Sapien thing deliberately aimed at getting one over



This page and the previous one, Leonardo Manco's pencil sketches for a proposed Nomad series.

Click on Globe returns to contents



This page: Covers to issues 57 thru 59 of Thunderbolts
Next page: The first appearance of Humus Sapien for 23 years.
Page after: More Nomad covers

on the message board fans who usually managed to work out most of the conspiracies in the comic?
FN: No, Humus Sapien's appearance was aimed at trying to find redemption for a very specific villain: Marvel Comics. Tom, Kurt, and I all agreed that it was something that should have been done a *looooong* time ago and we would be the ones able and willing to do it, so boom, we did it. Bringing a character who should have appeared 30 years ago, and had been originally designed as a villain, into Tbolts seemed to have a certain amount of symmetry to it.

I am *incredibly* proud that we were able to right a pretty grievous wrong, but in all honesty, I felt I didn't hold up my end of the bargain because the "return" became more important in my mind than the actual story. As a result, I think the story ended up being a little blah for me. The majority of readers "got it." They understood why this mystery had been worth the build-up. Plenty of other readers, though, said, "So what?" or "This is the 'big' mystery?" - and it really pissed me off because they *totally* missed the point!

I was amazed that people could have so completely lost their capacity for empathy! Couldn't they put themselves into Michael Barreiro's shoes and think how he must have felt for 30 *years*? Think of how completely he was screwed by Marvel's fuck-up. Can you imagine being 18 years old and winning a character contest - get a shot at getting your foot in the door at Marvel (this at a time before the Internet and multiple conventions or comic store appearances broke down so many barriers between the industry and its fans) - only to have the company totally ignore their obligations?

I mean, before working on the issue I talked to Michael and, even years after the fact, I could still hear the pain, frustration and, ultimately, the resignation in his voice. Having enjoyed a tremendous amount of success living out my childhood dreams, I could easily empathize with how badly he had been treated. Michael got to work on comics years later as an inker and a background penciller, but c'mon, that's a long way from having had a chance to have his character appear as an on-going member of a new X-Men team, as we were told would happen. Especially considering that that "new X-Men team" became the industry leader for the next 25 years!

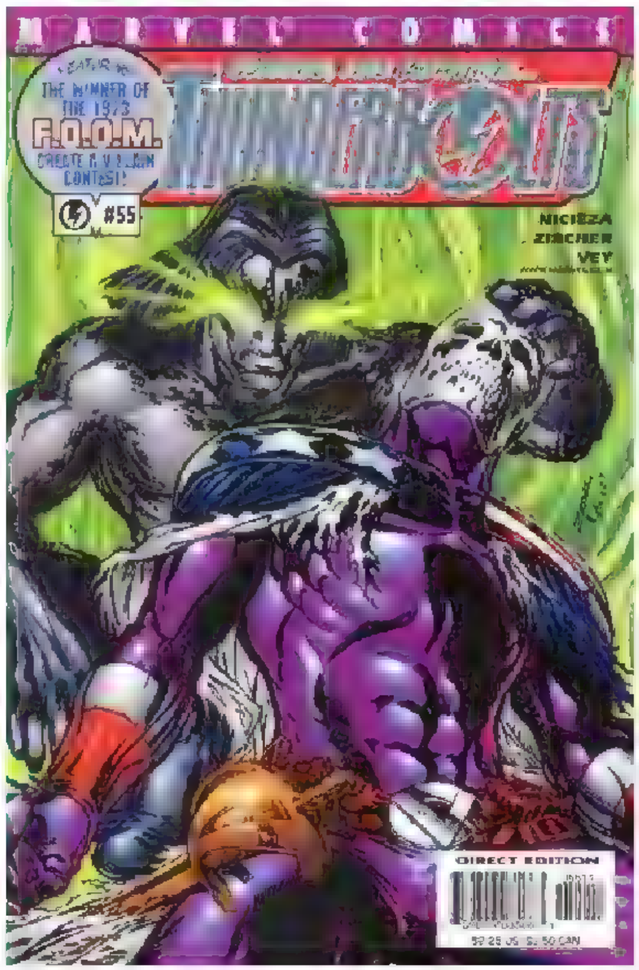
I posted something online to the effect that the Humus Sapien debut page at the end of Tbolts #54 should be *Wizard*'s "Best Moment in Comics" for 2001 and someone replied admonishing my conceit. The point had nothing to do with me or with Tbolts, it had everything to do with how important I felt this was - how important it was to finally right a wrong - no matter how small it might seem on its surface.

In my opinion, that comes a hell of a lot closer to being a "Best Moment" than the choice *Wizard* will probably make, like saying the word "Fuck" 77 times in Alias, or Punisher killing some thug in yet another innovative way. (Of course, that was before the events of Sept. 11 and the Heroes magazine which just came out; that should now be considered our industry's best moment of the year.)

BL: You said that it appears that The Avengers and Tbolts have been left alone in the editorial shake-ups. Why do you think this is and how long do you think this policy will remain?
FN: Well, I should be fair. Thor and Black Panther have had different artists but the same writers in 4 years – Dan Jurgens and Christopher Priest continue to make those books flow in a highly entertaining manner. Peter David has written the under-appreciated Captain Marvel for going on 2 years now. Other core MU titles - Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, Hulk, Iron Man, Captain America - for one reason or another haven't found that "click" or steadying connection.

Usually, pencillers can come and go because they burn out pretty fast, but writers stay on. When I say "shake up," I usually mean the replacement of a writer. I hope that the "policy," which isn't a policy at all - just one editor who appears happy with the work of the writers he has on those particular books - will stay in place forever, since I enjoy reading Kurt's Avengers book and I

Click on Globe returns to contents



enjoy writing Tbolts!

BL: Nomad was a series that looked great and had a pretty solid feel considering its road trip feel. Was that fun and whatever happened to S. Clarke Hawbaker?
FN: Man, you just mention his name and I have to grind my teeth in anger. A *decade* later and I still want to smack him upside the head. *Never* has there been an artist more *perfectly* suited to a character than Clarke was to Nomad. And *never* in my 16 years of experience in this field have I worked with more of a perpetual f-up! Damn, that hurt. Still, to this day, I think if Clarke had been able to draw Nomad - even for 8 or 10 issues a year - we could have made that book a lightning rod for industry attention. I'm serious, we tackled subject matter that no Marvel Comic dared to touch before or after. We looked at land use, gambling on Native American soil, the L.A. riots, H.I.V., American Nazis, transvestites, geez... I'm not saying I handled it all with nothing short of perfect maturity, there was a lot of cynicism and some gratuity involved, but month in and month out we skirted the fine line of Marvel's stricter-than-Code policies.

After Thunderbolts #50, I had hoped to get a new Nomad limited series approved, but even with what I consider a very strong proposal and an excellent artistic approach by Leonardo Manco (man, his design sketches are *gorgeous*), Joe Q passed on it. Unfortunately, either the character's a thud in his book or I'm a dud in his book, or both. Still, Nomad remains my favorite character to write in solo tales because of the kinds of stories I am able to tell with him. Heck, Tom suggested I write an inventory story for Tbolts with a Nomad focus, and I'm working on the plot right now, so maybe one day we'll get to do even more with him...

BL: What are you reading?
FN: A couple of weeks ago I finished the Adventures of Kavalier and Clay, by Michael Chabon. A great book and a must read for any fan of comics. Right now, the John Adams biography by David McCollough. Big damned book. They talked funny back then. Sort of how you silly Brits talk.

BL: And comics?
FN: Mostly the mainstream Marvel titles to keep up, but the ones I particularly enjoy are Avengers, Captain Marvel, and Black Panther. I'm also enjoying Grant Morrison's X-Men book. I think he is clueless about who the characters really are, but what he does with them and his facility with words sure is a shitload of fun to read!

> *"...my greatest vice ... websites with pictures of naked celebrities."*

From DC I always read Nightwing and JLA. Flash and Green Arrow have been fun lately. I'm also getting the Superman titles right now, mostly so I can whine about what a better job I could do if I got the chance ☺.

I'll pick up the occasional tpb like Powers or a Warren Ellis collection to see what the talk is about. I'm not fanatical about scouring my comic store shelves, so I'll miss an issue of a limited series and then just figure I better wait until the tpb comes out. Then the tpb comes out and I say, "Ah, do I really wanna spend twenty bucks on this?" It's very easy to convince myself not to buy comics nowadays. I'm a jaded old man who has read, written or edited so many thousands of comics at this point that I usually don't get too excited about them anymore.

I'm slowly filling out my DC Archives collections, but they're expensive babies. I also won't miss a Marvel Essentials volume if it's stuff I don't have. I love those big-ass black and white phone books. I think it's a *great* publishing program (that could only be made better by publishing volumes of "essential" reading that would help bring in new readers to a *current* title, like Black Panther, Captain Marvel, Deadpool, or Thunderbolts...)

BL: Here's a question that one of our readers asked, not specifically of you but in general. Do you know other comics creators socially and/or as good friends?
FN: Lots of them, though as we've gotten older, gotten married and had kids, there're far fewer opportunities for cross-country social interaction. I maintain email contact with lots of people. I still see several on a social basis, but I used to travel at least three times a month for several years - conventions, store appearances, business trips - so I socialized a *lot* back then. Now, with two kids, time is mostly - and rightfully - spent at home.

BL: So, what's on the horizon for you? I suppose if you're working on anything for DC you are forbidden to tell us on pain of death? But what are you working on that you can tell us about?
FN: My comics work is minimal right now, through no real choice of my own. I'm pretty far down the editorial call list. I enjoy working on Thunderbolts immensely and think that, overall, we have done a very good job of maintaining the strength of the title's premise. I'm working on a second Citizen V limited series that is turning out to be quite enjoyable. I'm trying to get a new limited series project with Steve Rude off the ground, but at this point we've bounced several permutations of it around at the editorial level and it's still a work in progress.

I would love to do more work for other companies. Editors at DC know of my interest but reciprocate in very tentative fashion. I wrote a fun Justice League Adventures issue that I think is scheduled for issue #3. I might be getting a fill-in shot on a Superman title, which would be great. I am finishing a Buffy the Vampire Slayer one-shot for Dark Horse that's not scheduled until sometime next year, so it's premature to talk about it too much. But being a long time fan of the show, it was fun to write it (even though Buffy's not even in it!).

BL: Anything outside of comics, or any ambitions outside of comics?
FN: Well, I started a pretty ambitious

Click on Globe returns to contents

crime fiction novel and halfway through I tried to secure a strong agent to represent me. That proved far more difficult than I expected it to, and during that process, I lost focus on the book and came up with a different story altogether that I liked far better. Many of my novelist friends all recommended the same thing: put away the one you started (and when I say, "started," I mean I was on page 304 when I stopped!). They all said I'd get back to it eventually if I was meant to. I heeded their advice and it's sitting on a disk in a drawer somewhere.

In the meantime, I was contracted to do a genre novel, which I'd been asked to do in the past but had turned down. This time, the same friends recommended I write the book because it would help me secure an agent who could then help me sell my crime fiction work. Talk about a cart before the horse Catch-22! Publish a book in order to get an agent!

So, I'm two thirds of the way through this genre novel and hope to finish it in the coming weeks. I am hesitant to discuss it because the publisher and licensor have a history of shelving such work, but I can say that if and when it is announced, it will be a logical marriage of writer to pre-existing character. I also think it is very different from other genre novels in the same line because it is a prequel to the character's original introduction and about a time in his life that has barely been explored before.

With different partners, I've also been actively involved in some development for animation, film and TV work, but much of that is and has been "throw it against the wall to see if it sticks" kind of work. I prefer not to discuss the specifics of any of them, since they are so specious in nature.

BL: Do you eat corned beef?
FN: No. It's not like I'm morally opposed to it or anything, but it's just not the kind of food I have in my back pocket.

BL: I like to tell people that Roy Thomas keeps herds of guinea pigs... Are there any weird pets in your life?
FN: My daughters have a hermit crab and two fish tanks. The only weird thing about any of that is I have learned snails fuck like bandits. Snails get it on. Snails dig the wa-wa pedal. Snails don't need Cinemax After Dark. I wish I got as much as snails do.

BL: I heard this rumour that you were a bit of babe magnet? Shurely shome mishtake - you work in comics? What's the story?
FN: You know, I *used* to be a fun-loving, happy-go-lucky, party-and-pick-up-the-tab (or at least let Marvel pick it up!) kind of guy.

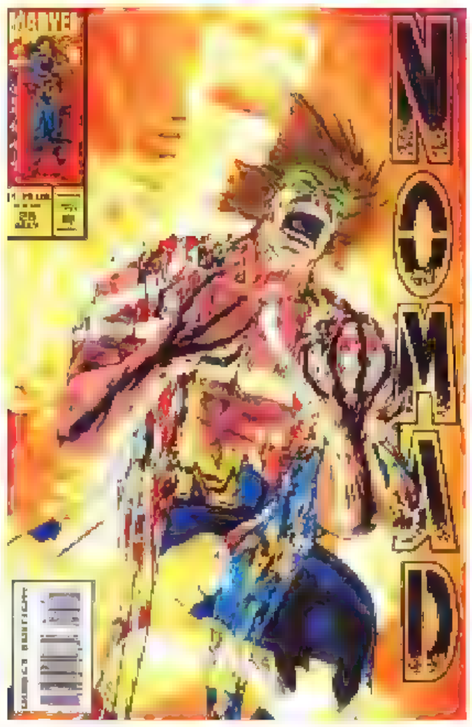
Unlike the stereotypical perception of people in comics, I was reasonably not ugly. I was quite capable of making a barehanded backwards running catch from the shortstop position into the outfield. I could hit a ball down the opposite field-line and stretch it to a double with aplomb. I could stand on a stage in front of two thousand people at a convention with William Shatner and banter like a pro. I had a reasonably un-doughy body. I had a readily available Amex card.

What woman wouldn't love that? ☺

Now, I'm just an old, bald schlub dad schlepping his daughter to soccer practice in a mini-van.

Thanks for depressing me. ☺

BL: What music pushes your buttons?
FN: Geez. Music. Ancient history. Used to be REM, Midnight Oil, U2, Joe Jackson, Elvis Costello, Talking Heads - crap, more than I can remember. Nowadays, I don't listen too much anymore. My daughter likes D'ream and Britney and N'Sync. They're good, aren't they?



BL: What TV are you into?
FN: Too much for my own good. First whatever sports are on: baseball, football or hockey. *Buffy*, *Sopranos*, *West Wing*, *Law and Order* are usually my "regular" watches. After that, I'll catch other stuff off and on like *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Band of Brothers*, *Angel*, *Enterprise*, *Frasier*, *Law & Order: Meter Maid Unit*, whatever. Usually, by the time the kids go to sleep, my wife and I just flop down on to a couch and stare numbly at the screen. I'll tape a lot and watch it while I treadmill.

BL: Buffy *fan, huh? Best episode? And if it's not "The Body" why not?*
FN: "The Body" was great drama and a great episode, but I don't know if it was a great *Buffy* episode, because to me, *Buffy* encompasses *humor* as well as *drama* and "The Body" most obviously and necessarily lacked humor. I would probably say "Hush", the silent episode from last year, has been my favorite. But to me, the show is not about individual episodes, it's about the building of sub-plots and ongoing development of the characters and the always snarky writing.

BL: Angel*?*
FN: I actually like *Angel* and think it continues to improve. Favorite eps? I don't know, I liked the whole Darla redemption arc from last year. That was good Angel material.

BL: Do you have any vices; you know, beer, cigs (I almost wrote "fags" and then realised the word has two different meanings either side of the pond), cheap women, goats, drugs? And do you want to buy the negatives?
FN: Well, I don't think fags are a vice, just a lifestyle choice. And goats with fags I don't particularly approve of, because those poor goats could get lung cancer.

Hmm... I think I'm getting my derogatory slang uses screwed up.

I used to drink a lot more than I do now. Just a few beers at a hockey game. I never smoked cigarettes. I try to exercise just enough to keep myself from becoming a stereotypical gelatinous blob. I would have to say my greatest vice up to now has been hair loss. That and websites with pictures of naked celebrities.

*BL: How *is* Nicieza pronounced?*
FN: It's pronounced: Eet (as in "Eat") Me.

Click on Globe returns to contents

WANTED: NOMAD
Alias: Jack Monroe
State and Federal authorities are seeking
suspect in connection with the vigilante-style
execution of Sergeant Umberto Santiago.
If sighted, please contact your local authorities.
DO NOT ATTEMPT TO APPREHEND SUSPECT
Suspect is considered armed and dangerous.

BL: What floats your boat in terms of movies?
FN: Good, well thought out action movies (a rarity nowadays). Good romantic comedies. Unexpected structures, like *Memento*, *Go*, *Rushmore* or *Election*.

And straight-ahead, "small" noirish stories, like *A Simple Plan* or *Joyride*.

BL: Do you have any hobbies you can tell us about?
FN: I have taken to chopping firewood in my backyard. It is absurdly exhausting, but makes me feel as if I have some testosterone left in my body. I don't know if that qualifies as a hobby or self-flagellation. I bike-ride about 40 miles a week, which isn't enough, but hey, how much are you riding you lame-ass, skinny, pale Brit? I would like eventually to coach youth soccer again. I did it for 12 years when I was younger and now my daughter plays, though the thought of having me coach her gives her agita.

BL: Doesn't it annoy you that in the States "soccer" - ugh - is a girls' sport?
FN: You lout. C'mon - I coached youth soccer for 12 years way back when and it was a co-ed team. Two of my best and most competitive players were girls. In fact, I made one of them a co-captain because she was such a determined, team-first player.

My daughter plays on a travel team for seven year olds and now there are enough kids playing the sport where they have separate leagues for girls and boys. Don't be a sexist British pig. Girls and women play nearly all sports at a very skilled and competitive level. Geez, who the heck are you to criticize, your national programs couldn't win a Kidney Pie Baking Contest, much less a sporting event! ☺

BL: I mean, I'm sure you're proud about your daughter playing, but... come on; Diego Maradona, Gabrielle Batistuta, Juan Veron, Michael Owen, David Beckham and Glenn Hoddle, these are players who are justifiably adored and treated as demigods all over the world, yet the USA - regardless of the fact that they qualify for world cups - treat soccer like it's some dull, boring game...
FN: Well, I've played, coached and watched, and I think that in comparison to American football, basketball or hockey, professional soccer *is* a boring game. Baseball is boring, too, if you're not a fan (which I am). In the USA, action and scoring are key, and you do get very little of that with soccer at the professional level. It is about patience and artistry, neither of which Americans are very good at. If you played soccer, you can appreciate watching professional soccer on tv or at a stadium, but I still prefer watching football and other sports instead.

BL: Argentina or USA for World Cup 2002? Will you be watching it or have you sold your soul to baseball and American Football?
FN: I would like to see the USA advance solely because I think it would benefit soccer in this country. I've lived here for more than 35 years, so it's not like I have much of a vested rooting interest in Argentina, you know. I mean, outside of that whole *Malvinas* thing...

BL: Chances of an England v Argentina final?
FN: You know, the only chance England has of making a Cup final is if they buy tickets to go watch.

BL: The hand of God? Hmm?
FN: You can whine about it for the next century and it won't change the fact that your national program sucks! ☺

BL: I always think the ends of interviews tend to be a load of bollocks, what with lots of thank yous and Oscar acceptance speeches, tears and histrionics... so I'll just say "Thank you Fabian Nicieza for your time and would you do me the honour of telling the world just how you actually pronounce your surname?☺
FN: No. Go buy Thunderbolts. BL

WHY IS THUNDERBOLTS SO DAMNED ADDICTIVE?

Jenni Cole investigates Justice Like Lightning

WHEN Fabian Nicieza took over **Thunderbolts** from fan favourite Kurt Busiek, he had a hard act to follow. Busiek had taken a handful of distinctly D-list Marvel celebs, and fashioned them into a group to fill the gap left by the big guns' side trip to the Onslaught project. The trick that saved **Thunderbolts** from being the *fin de siecle* answer to **The Champions** was that they were in fact a bunch of D-list *villains*, playing at being good guys until they'd fooled everyone enough to take over the world - except that the more they "played" at being good guys, the more some of them started to like it.

It was a clever idea and, as the book rolled on, word of mouth spread that this was the title to watch, a sleeper hit that had taken everyone by surprise. Except me. I tried **Thunderbolts**. I really did, but it just seemed to lack a certain *je ne sais quoi*. The concept appealed - a bunch of reforming supervillains with plenty of scope for in-team bickering. This was the best period of **The Avengers** redux. The Black Widow knew this too, and dropped by occasionally to keep an eye on them and tell heart-warming stories of bad boys who'd made it to the good league. Hawkeye joined and became their leader - his way of paying back the debt he owed the heroes who'd given him his second chance. And yet it still didn't do it for me.

Then, the people who know me told me to read issue 39. But they'd told me to read the previous 38 as well, and I was getting bored. Still, I gave in - and I was converted. Scourge, the vigilante who'd been popping out of nowhere to off villains he thought deserved it, not only killed Baron Zemo but did it in such a way that it suggested - but only between the lines, if you knew your Marvel history - that

Click on Globe returns to contents

he was the ghost of Bucky Barnes. This was good. Then I noticed that it wasn't the same writer anymore - it was Fabian Nicieza instead. By this time, a couple of months had passed. The latest issue on the shelves, still written by Fabian Nicieza, once again guest starred the Black Widow, one of my favourite characters. I told myself I'd give it a go while she was around. I could always drop it once she'd gone.

Two issues later, I was addicted. Completely. **Thunderbolts** was impossible to put down. I picked it off the pile first. I finished it desperate to know what happened next. The stories were plot heavy and intricately woven, a perfect mix of knowing continuity for the best reasons - not to appease old fanboys, or to let anyone play a trivia game of how much they'd

studied the Official Handbook of the Marvel Universe, but because it made damn good stories even better. There were mysteries to be solved - who was Scourge? What was in the pod labelled HS-1? Was there a government conspiracy against the superhero community and, if so, how deep did it run? And then there were the human mysteries - which of the Thunderbolts were really on the side of the angels? Which were in it purely for what they stood to gain? And where did the line between altruism and heroism fall anyway?

If **Thunderbolts** came down - mostly - on the side of the law, did it matter if they sometimes strayed too far across it on alien worlds where the recipients of their rough justice were only getting what they'd asked for? Fabian Nicieza was asking these questions every single issue. Not one here and there, every now and again, but every single month. There was hardly time to breathe before one of the Tbolts changed sides again, or another moral quandary got thrown into the mix, and because, in the long-term Marvel status quo, these "heroes" are still listed under Villain in the Handbook, you know they can go from one side to the other at any time. This is a book where things can really change. It gives **Thunderbolts** an edge and an unpredictability that most Marvel titles don't have. And it makes it absolutely compelling reading.

The other real joy of Fabian's **Thunderbolts** is more understated but none the less important to its success. My new found love of the book soon drew me to the Thunderbolts discussion forum at www.comicboards.com, where I was surprised to discover a younger, less experienced, more "virgin" crowd than at some of the other forums. **Thunderbolts**, despite its more than solid grounding in obscure old issues of **Spider-Man**, **The Avengers** and even **Luke Cage: Power Man**, was selling to the new boys in droves. Its tips of the hat to past continuity were leading them to the back issue bins. Not the graphic novel racks, full of the worthy and critically acclaimed, but the cheap boxes packed with **West Coast Avengers** (for Hawkeye's previous leadership forays); **Solo Avengers** (more Hawkeye, and his relationship with journalist Gayle Rodgers, a Tbolts supporting character); Mark Gruenwald's **Captain America**, for Scourge and Bucky clues; past issues of anything with the pre-**Tbolts** Tbolts being naughty. This comic was, secretly and subversively, educating a new audience about Marvel's rich past. **Avengers: Under Siege**, the superb story arc by Roger Stern in which the Avengers are knocked about by the Masters of Evil, got the trade paperback treatment because the **Thunderbolts** readers wanted it. But all of this is done not in the sneery "look how much I know" way that's been prevalent in some Marvel comics recently, taunting you to dare play in the big fanboy titles before you've passed muster, but in a gentler, come-and-join us way. You don't have to read back issues - you just might work out the mysteries more quickly if you do.

If you've resisted **Thunderbolts** so far - pick it up. It's dense, it's tightly woven, but it's not inaccessible. A book that's gained so much by word of mouth can't afford to be, but then

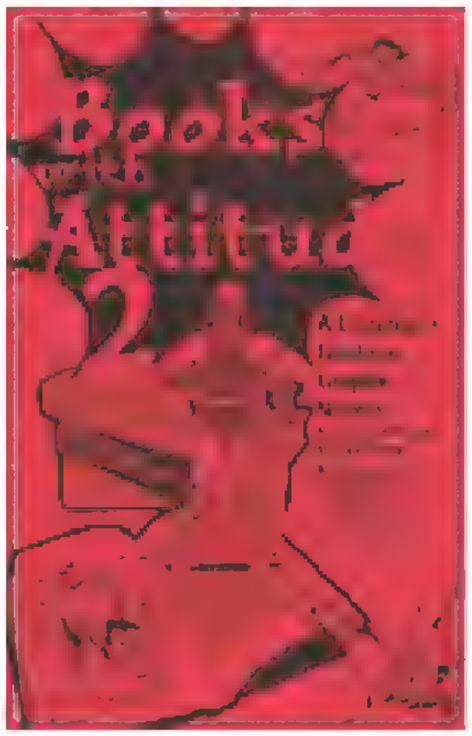
again I've got a nagging feeling that the real reason is this: Fabian Nicieza has never once forgotten the joy of picking up your first comic for the first time and knowing that next issue anything can happen. It's an underrated skill in today's nostalgia-hampered market, but Marvel should never underestimate it. And neither should you. BL

Click on Globe returns to contents

COMICS FREE-FOR-ALL

Selina Lock looks at the easy way to read comics – the library

OVER the years comics have all but disappeared from British newsagents, leaving comic shops as the main source of reading matter for fans. However, people may be surprised to find that their local library is more likely to stock graphic novels than in the past. There has been a quiet revolution happening in the UK library community over the last ten years with regard to their attitude toward graphic novels. One of the things that got librarians interested in developing collections was a book called Graphic Account edited by Keith Barker, on developing graphic novel collections for 16-25 year olds, which was published by the Youth Libraries Group in the early 1990s. Andy Sawyer (of the Science Fiction Library at the University of Liverpool) did an annotated bibliography and there were a number of articles, including one by comic fan and author Phillip Pullman. Another aspect has been the numerous literacy projects across the country, which have focused on graphic novels. The medium is regarded as a very good route to attracting that elusive species the Teenage Boy into libraries and encouraging them to read.



One very successful scheme that has been running over the past year or so across the country has been in association with the Games Workshop chain of stores, which produces and sells a range of role-playing and table-top battle games. Games Workshop has been running Warhammer Roadshows at libraries to attract more kids into gaming and into the libraries. The Roadshows have proven very popular, with some events attracting up to a hundred participants. Many attendees then join the library in order to borrow the Warhammer novels on display during the sessions. In fact, the scheme has been seen as such a success that the National Reading Campaign named Andy Jackson-Hall, manager of Games Workshop's York branch, one of its Reading Champions Of The Year, owing to his enthusiasm and support by setting up links between Games Workshop and libraries. Sally Brown, a Youth Librarian in Essex, told Borderline that the Games Workshop events in their area have been so popular that they are already planning more events tying in with the December cinema release of the *Lord Of The Rings* film.

> *"...would you want your 10-year-old to pick up a copy of* Preacher*?"*

Other literacy schemes that involve graphic novels cover a wide range of young people; Sally Brown has been using them in projects for young offenders and Harlow public library in Essex runs successful workshops for young people on reading and producing graphic novels. Other projects range from the YouthBOOX project, which encourages reading, to the Talking Pictures scheme in North Tyneside, which got a group of 14-16 year olds to produce their own graphic novel. An article on Talking Pictures in *Literacy Today* journal (May 2000) cites the main achievements of the scheme as being an enhancement of the self-esteem of the youngsters, continued mutual support and a stimulating approach to developing graphic and written literacy. Someone else trying to encourage libraries to develop collections for adults and children is Mel Gibson, an ex-librarian, who has run training and promotional events across Britain about comics and graphic novels for libraries, schools and other organizations since 1993 when she contributed to Graphic Account. The training mostly focuses on getting participants familiar with comics and graphic novels and developing stock selection skills, but also on promoting collections once they have been developed. In addition, she is the trainer for the YouthBOOX graphics project. She also runs promotional talks and activities in libraries and schools (in the latter, often as part of school book weeks) and has produced several bibliographies of titles for younger readers under the title Books with Attitude, for Farries.

Although the rise in literacy projects involving graphic novels has given this form a higher profile, it has also raised issues regarding whether it is always the most appropriate medium to use.

As comic readers, we have learnt how to read comics; we know that the panels are usually read from left to right with speech bubbles from top to bottom, but that these conventions can vary depending on the type of work we are reading. However, people new to the medium might not instinctively know this, and their difficulties can be compounded if they also have literacy problems. Others may not have the visual literacy needed to read

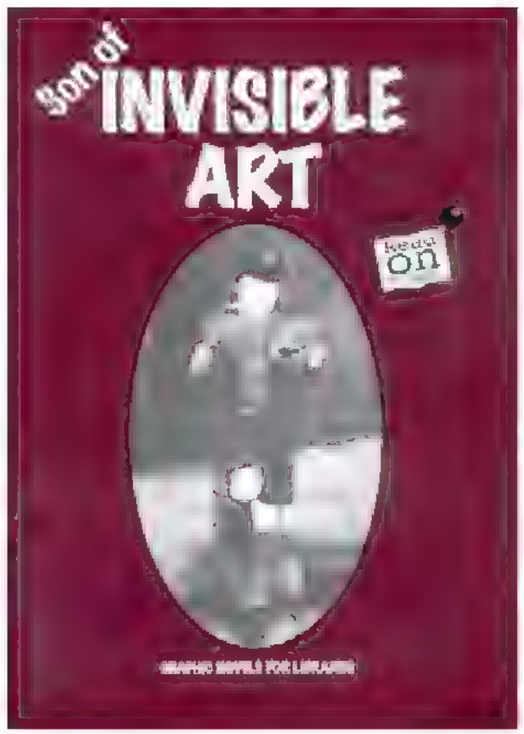
Click on Globe returns to contents

the 101 BEST GRAPHIC NOVELS
Stephen Weiner

text combined with words; this was demonstrated by a recent comment on the Sequential Tart forum <*www.sequentialtart.com*> from comic creator Sean Bieri. Bieri was discussing a recent session he ran in the States, discussing comics with a group of librarians. One of the attendees said she had an epiphany, as "she was a lifelong avid reader, had always had an easy time with words, but since she wasn't a visual person, Nausicaa had stymied her and for the first time she said she knew what it must feel like to be a 'poor reader'. She recommended assigning teachers Nausicaa to read and seeing how far they get, to give them an insight into the feelings of kids who have a hard time with reading (but who may have high visual literacy) and get stuck into special ed classes."

There are also other barriers facing librarians who wish to develop graphic novel collections. The perception persists among some librarians and the public that comics are for children. An upshot of this is that graphic novel collections in libraries may be placed in the children's or young adult section, when clearly some popular comic titles are not suitable for that age range. For example, would you want your 10 year old to pick up something like Preacher? Some libraries have opted to place graphic novels for mature readers in the adult fiction section, where they may not be borrowed as much. Others place them on the top shelves of the graphic novel section, where younger patrons cannot access them. Neither solution is entirely ideal.

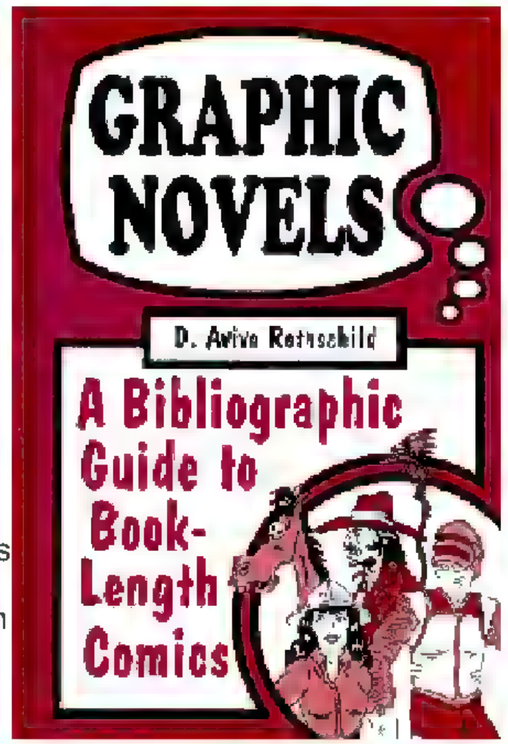
Another barrier is the actual ordering of graphic novels, as traditional library suppliers are unlikely to carry them in stock and information about graphic novels used to be hard to find. However, librarians are now more aware of sources such as Previews, Wizard and Borderline (for a free alternative, which is always welcomed by an under-funded library service), and have produced many publications to aid in the selection of stock, such as Steven Weiner's 100 Graphic Novels for Public Libraries (1996), and Graphic Novels: A Bibliographic Guide To Book-length Comics (D. Aviva Rothschild, 1995). One of the most recent UK publications is Son of Invisible Art: Graphic Novels For Libraries by Joss O'Kelly (For more details: *www.buckscc.gov.uk/liss/son.stm*). O'Kelly is a chartered librarian working for the Library and Information Service for Schools in Buckinghamshire, and has been piloting the use of graphic novels in Primary and Secondary schools for the last five years. In the foreword to



Son of Invisible Art, she describes some of the experiences she has had with pupils: "After one talk to a Y9 [Year 9, or thirteen to fourteen year old] class, the pupils queued to borrow the books, they sat quietly on their own or in pairs poring over the pages, they (not so quietly!) swapped volumes and ideas with each other. They asked 'Can we have more?' and 'Where can we buy these?' More perceptive than many adults, they confounded expectations by their marked preference for more serious, thoughtful, black and white or 'specialist' books over the run-of-the-mill superhero sagas. The English Department was 'delighted to see the interest in reading that these novels has stimulated, particularly among boys.'" Sounds like an inspiring experience for the jaded comic fans among us, and makes you wonder if librarians are doing more to ensure the acceptance and continued existence of comics than some areas of the industry are!

The situation for ordering graphic novels has also improved, due to many libraries striking up good working relationships with local or specialist comic shops, such as Page 45 in the UK, and with distributors such as Diamond recognising that libraries can be an important source of revenue. A recent article in the internet magazine *Today's Librarian* entitled "Holy Graphic Novels", by Kimberly Hundley, points out that Diamond has been attending the American Library Association show for about seven years, while DC Comics has been attending since 1997, and both have seen an increase in the acceptance of the format in recent years. Some of our readers may wish to take issue with a comment in the article, made by Diamond's Marketing Vice President Roger Fletcher: "This is a uniquely American art form and we'd like to see it in libraries."

When libraries have to choose very carefully what they are able to stock, it is important to support ventures such as this to ensure that they continue. What better way to introduce new readers to works they might think twice about buying? BL



Click on Globe returns to contents

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COMICS IN THIS CENTURY...

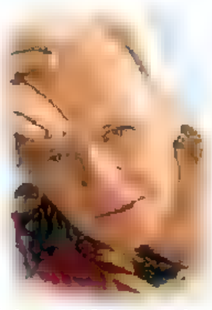
In December 1999, Borderline editor Phil Hall, while still working at Comics International, got bored and decided to do his own bit of astrology. Now being reprinted because a few people asked nicely, here is the 2001 remix of Comics in the Next Millennium...

2002: KEVIN SMITH and a consortium of people including independent filmmakers, Joe Quesada and Bill Jemas buy Marvel Comics.

2003: Brian Michael Bendis's new Marvel title My Laundry List is hailed a critical success. At the Harvey Awards it beats DC's Chuck Dixon's Shopping Lists: Year One and amazingly Garth Ennis's How to Get Rich on One Idea to the top position.

2004: Hot on the heels of Marvel's success with its Ultimates line, DC launches its Consummate Comics line, kicking off with Consummate Superman, Consummate Batman and, of course, Consummate JLA. History will now view Impact Comics as a blinding success.

2005: Because of the Kevin Smith connection, a number of famous actors, musicians and



politicians start producing comics for Marvel. Jerry Seinfeld writes the Fantastic Four. Former President Bill Clinton writes himself into the X-Men. Eminem gives us the rapping Avengers and Anthony Hopkins takes on Dr Strange.

2006: Under the advice of Jeph Loeb, Rob Liefeld becomes the first comic artist to be cryogenically frozen in liquid nitrogen. Loeb explains, "Rob's style, although quite brilliant, is just too far ahead of the current crop of mediocre artists. We feel that in fifty years' time he will take the industry by storm, once again."

2007: Despite changing his name to Cool Jay Bee, donning the latest trendy fashions and taking to calling all of his editors "Mofo", John Byrne still cannot get a regular comicbook.

2009: Using advanced computer technology, the first comic written, drawn, lettered, coloured and edited by a computer goes on sale on the Internet. However, after bad reviews, the writing application refuses to work with the AutoCAD program "unless it draws like Kirby."

2011: Despite ethical problems, the Edinburgh group that cloned Dolly the Sheep successfully recreates a version of Jack Kirby (from cells gathered from his drawing board at Marvel in 1964). The clone is offered to Kevin Smith's Marvel Comics and is drawing the Fantastic Four by November.

2012: DC unveils its own Jack Kirby clone; DNA taken from one of his Mister Miracle pages means that although DC has its own Kirby, many believe it is decidedly

inferior to Marvel's.

2015: Kurt Busiek realises his ambition of writing every single Marvel and DC character ever created. His groundbreaking Rocket Racer versus Will O' The Wisp three-parter is nominated for Eisner, Eagle and Squiddy awards.

2017: Even though the court case disappeared up its own arse 15 years earlier, a handful of comics bods (namely Todd McFarlane, Neil Gaiman, Mark Buckingham, Dez Skinn, Alan Davis, Alan Moore, Garry Leach and Uncle Tom Cobley and all) mud wrestle for the rights to publish all of the acres of boring column inches of Miracleman coverage in a collected book.

2018: Eleven years after it should have come out, the final issue of Cerebus goes on sale. Dave Sim admits from his retirement home that he had realised that with one issue to go he was nowhere near finishing the story, so he has spent the last decade producing the 2,743 page final issue. The comic, on sale for $2500, has a print run of 27 (as most Cerebus fans killed themselves during the gap between issues).

2019: After the belated finale of Cerebus, its appearance sparks a new trend: Martin Wagner produces the first issue of Hepcats for sixteen years. Jae Lee releases Hellshock #6.

Robert Crumb thinks about producing another comic...

2022: Over 3,000 Internet users threaten a virtual sit-in in protest over the impending cancellation of Deadpool 2020. The sit-in participants, organised by comic-based Artificial Intelligence listbots, have threatened to remain online, mass sending abusive e-mails to Marvel executives.

2025: The world's first genetically modified comic book is released. A spokesman for the GM company responsible said "We think the F1 X-Men hybrid will create a revolution in comics sales. It combines all the best parts of Grant Morrison, Frank Quitely, Chris Bachalo, Chris Claremont, Jim Lee, Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Neal Adams and Roy Thomas - the result will be breathtaking. Unfortunately, every time we attempted to use the DNA of John Byrne we got a horrible mutation, so we've built the strongest genetic variant we could without him."

2026: Green Party activists are sentenced to twelve months Virtual Prison™after hijacking and burning over 1 million copies of the F1 X-Men Hybrid #1.

2027: Stan Lee (celebrating his 105th birthday) launches Stan

Click on Globe returns to contents

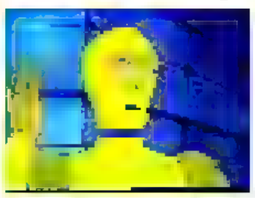
Lee's Rancid Porcupine Comics. The former Marvel front man, who has been suffering from Alzheimer's Disease, is the writer of Rancid Porcupine #1, the Marvel Jack Kirby Clone illustrates. This from the man who gave us Ravage!

2028: DC launches Carmine Infantino's Strange Adventure Comics using clones of Joe Orlando, Dick Dillin, the DC Jack Kirby, Dick Giordano, John Broome, Sid Greene, Nick Cardy and surprisingly, Stan Lee.

2030: The comics world reels after the arrest of the Marvel Jack Kirby for the murder of Stan Lee. The clone claims that Lee was stealing his conceptual rights.

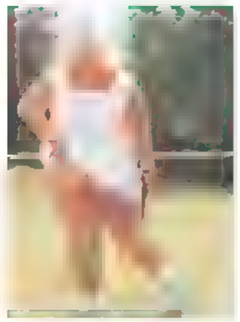
2032: Scandal at the San Diego Comic Convention as Neil Gaiman runs away with a younger clone of himself.

2035: Computer generated comics are boycotted by humans, causing widespread

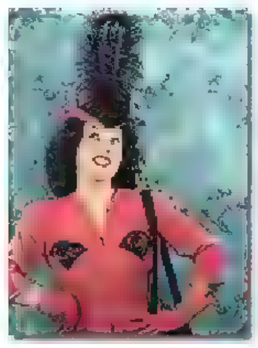


problems with the now sentient Internet. A trade war develops when human publishing companies refuse to carry the LucasLife™artificially produced adaptation of *Star Wars: Episode 8 - C3PO Umpires Nude Tennis*.

As a result, computers deny humans access to the Net. This causes a massive war on land and in Virtual Reality and two-thirds of humanity is wiped out through boredom.



2040: Genetically modified comic hybrids are banned when it is discovered that if left in a mylar bag for too long the F1 X-Men Hybrid #1 grows three nipples and develops a penchant for Ethel Merman show tunes.

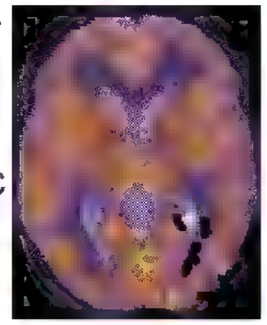


2045: After many attempts, John Byrne discovers that because of some bizarre cross hatching in the make up of his DNA, he cannot ever be cloned.

2054: The canister containing the cryogenically frozen Rob Liefeld is thawed. Scientists

believe it to be a relative success. Unfortunately, Liefeld's brain cannot be located. A young intern offers a solution and produces the pickled Marvel Jack Kirby's brain. The melding is a complete success; unfortunately, the Marvel Jack Kirby cannot live with the knowledge that he has no natural talent and throws himself off the New Brooklyn Bridge.

2061: Jm Shooter's brain relaunches Marvel Comics with Fantastic 4-D.



2062: The DC Jack Kirby clone relaunches DC Comics, but soon faces a court challenge when a clone of Jenette Kahn launches another comics publisher under the same name. The case is further muddied when the Carmine Infantino clone launches Dee Cee Comics. Neal Adams' clone's Direct Continuity Comics is largely ignored by most people.

2070: The first million-selling comic for over sixty years! While Marvel and the three DCs struggle to gain any sales foothold, the revolutionary Rewriting History Comics (formed by the still sprightly Alan Moore), with its unique retelling of historical comic events, is the biggest selling comics publisher in the world. Rewriting History Comics' best seller When We Didn't Glow In The Dark is the world's first holographic comic.

2080: Archaeologists uncover three complete finished yet unpublished issues of Dale Keown's Pitt and a collection of his own music CDs.

2088: The World Government acknowledges Peter David's contribution to world comics. His statue takes pride of place next to those of Mark Waid, Len Kaminski, Mike W. Barr, Devin Grayson and Joe Quesada. A spokesperson for the Comics Hall of Fame comments, "We're looking for bigger premises."

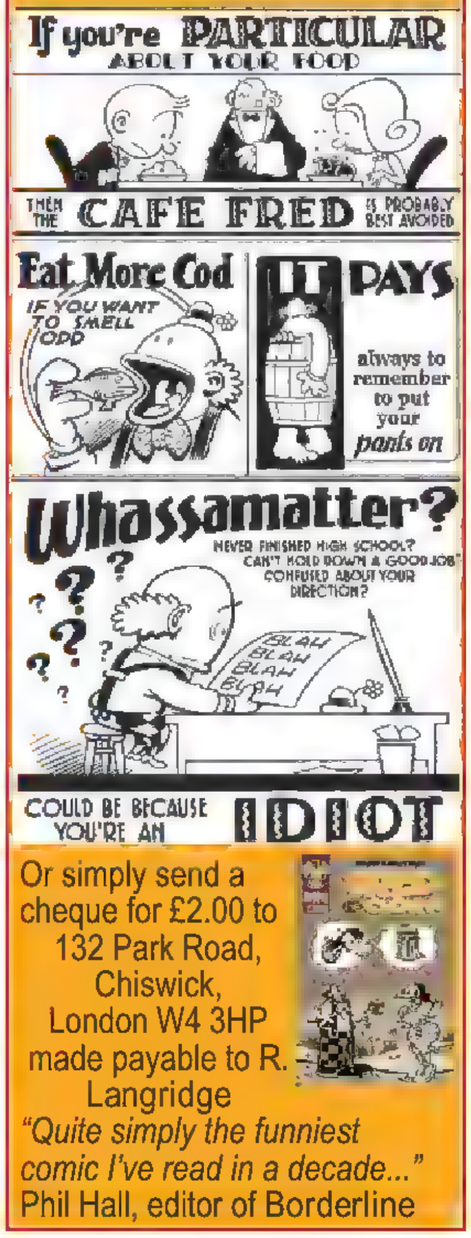
2096: A world paper shortage means that comics' production is suspended indefinitely. Fanatical fans are arrested throughout the world for stealing trees. Paper becomes an illegal commodity and people found with it are made to live on a raft.

2099: In New New Nooyork approximately 27 comic fans gather at the site believed to be Marvel's old offices and pay homage to an imprint once named after this year. While these people pay tribute, a smaller group of people stand in awe, some even crying, amazed at the extreme lengths to which comics fans will go to prove their anal retentiveness.

Fredvertisement

FRED THE CLOWN

Issue #1 costs $2.95 (plus $1.25 postage outside the UK) or £2.00 inclusive in the UK and can be purchased by going to *www.hotelfred.com* and clicking the "Buy Stuff" button. Also, hassle your comic shop manager, that sometimes works!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"Quite simply the funniest comic I've read in a decade..." Phil Hall, editor of Borderline

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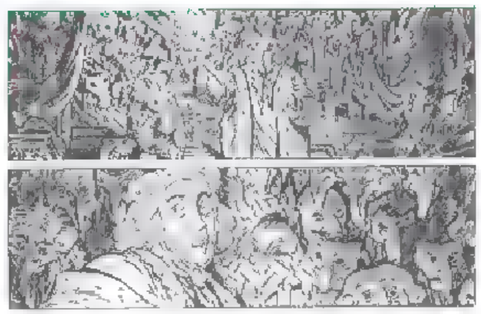
MARQUING TIME

GUY DAVIS is probably best known for his distinctive line art style, used to great effect in series like Sandman Mystery Theatre, The Nevermen and creator-owned series Baker Street. Davis is receiving a great deal of critical acclaim for his latest creator-owned project, The Marquis. A 1997 Caliber one-shot entitled The Marquis: Danse Macabre - Les Preludes was intended to preview the upcoming series, but other commitments and deadlines prevented Davis from going any further at that point. Fast forward to May 2000, and the launch of the re-imagined Danse Macabre from Oni Press. Davis had used the gap to fine tune the concept of the series and redraw most of the previously completed pages.

Explaining the thrust of the series to any Borderline readers who may be unfamiliar with it, Davis told us: "The Marquis is the story of Vol de Galle, a man who worked for the Inquisition in the fictional 18th century world of Venisalle. In this world, the devils have escaped Hell and hid within the souls of the townspeople to be free. Vol believes himself blessed by the saints with the ability to see into the souls of the living and hunt down the escaped devils of Hell. As 'The Marquis', he sets out on a crusade to hunt down these devils, but you're never sure if he's actually blessed and killing the devils



or murdering the innocent townspeople until the end of the first series *Danse Macabre*. After that the story takes a twist and you learn exactly what has been going on in the mind of Vol de Galle."

Moving onto the current story, Davis continued: "The new miniseries, *Hell's Courtesan*, picks up after the end of *Danse Macabre* and follows Vol de Galle accepting his fate as the Marquis. In this two-part story he continues his crusade to hunt down the

devils of Hell, but soon finds he has some competition, as something else is hunting and killing the damned before he does. It's not so much a 'whodunit' as a 'whydidit.' This storyline will be followed by a 3 part mini-series titled *The Midwife* before the next full 6 issue series, *Devil's Reign*." *The Midwife* is scheduled for the end of 2002, with *Devil's Reign* expected some time in 2003.

The Marquis is planned to be a finite number of miniseries, with three major movements. *Danse Macabre* has already been collected in trade paperback form by Oni. *Hell's Courtesan* and *The Midwife* will form the basis for the second Marquis collection, with *Devil's Reign* as the third.

Outside of the core Marquis storyline, there are distant plans for a spinoff which would serve as a prequel, revealing a lot more of the history underpinning the Marquis' world.

Davis spoke to Borderline about his current workload: "As for other projects before *Devil's Reign* - aside from *Hell's Courtesan* and *The Midwife*, I'm doing work for hire on a couple of miniseries for DC and Marvel. I'll be pencilling and inking both, but right now they won't let me say much more than that until they announce it." It is assumed that the DC project is a Batman miniseries that had been announced previously,

but the Marvel project remains more guarded, with only the smallest of hints circulating that it will feature new characters rather than any of the established Marvel icons.

Hell's Courtesan contains 32 pages per issue, with story and art throughout by Davis, lettered by Vince Locke. Covers are by Davis, painted by Locke.

Jay Eales BL

Click on Globe returns to contents

TALES OF ASGARD

Lew Stringer takes a look at Norwegian comics

"CUTBACK to reprints". "No market for comics". "End of the industry". Sadly, these three phrases are often spoken by publishers in the UK these days. Proof of the pudding is the dwindling number of comics on our newsstands. No doubt about it. We're going to Hell in a handcart. Yet the opposite is true over the sea in Norway. Hold on. Norway? Isn't that a land of funny accents and frost giants? Well, no, as it happens. The accents are very pleasant and when I was there in September the climate was definitely warmer than it was over in Britain.

I was visiting Norway as one of the guests at the annual comics festival, Raptus. Since 1996, the beautiful harbour city of Bergen has played host to the festival, and Raptus 2001 attracted an impressive number of around 3,800 visitors. This year's guest list also included Mike Collins, Mike Carey, Lee Townsend, Dave Windett and Alan Grant from the UK, along with many Scandinavian creators such as Bjørn Ousland, Lise, and Frode Ølverti. American guests were also invited, but due to the tragedy of September 11 (only three days before) Rodney Ramos and Shannon Wheeler were unable to fly over. Fortunately, Jeff Smith, who was already in Norway, was able to attend, much to the delight of his legion of fans eager to have their **Bone** albums signed.

The event lasts from Friday to Sunday and is always held in the Grieghallen building in the centre of Bergen, with talks, displays, signings, and comics for sale on three floors. The set up is pretty similar to UK occasions, but the positive atmosphere certainly lives up to it being called a festival rather than merely a convention. The events are wide ranging, including a writing and/or a drawing workshop (aided by a video link to a big screen); a tribute to veteran creators (Mort Walker, creator of **Beetle Bailey**, was the special guest in 2000); a special event for the very young (i.e.; a folk tale read aloud whilst being sketched by a guest artist); promotion for new creators, plus an awards dinner. Unlike conventions in the US and UK, Raptus attracts readers of all ages and interests, not just the 16-25 year old superhero fan base. Most of the Scandinavian creators always attend, and in previous years guests from abroad have included John Buscema, Sergio Aragonés, Stan Saki, Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson.

Although not on the scale of the Angouleme festival, Raptus is promoted by ads and displays in shop windows and by a costume parade through the city centre at Saturday lunchtime! (Much to the bemusement of tourists, who probably thought that residents dressing up as such characters as Catwoman, Spider-Man and Conan were part of a Norwegian tradition!)

Comics were first introduced to Norway via reprints of American newspaper strips of the early 20th Century, such as **The Katzenjammer Kids**. These comics always appeared around Christmas, and such "Christmas Comics" have since become a tradition. When Norwegian artists began to produce their own strips after the second World War, many were based on folk tales or involved countryside stories. Perhaps this was a way to help the Norwegians regain their national feelings after the German occupation during the war. A comic named **Tuss og Troll** started comic strips based on Norwegian folklore, illustrated by Solveig Muren Sanden, a female cartoonist who was born in 1918 and still draws some pages today, at the grand age of 83! Solveig, the guest of honour at Raptus 2001, says her comics are influenced by what she sees from her home. As she lives in the valleys far from the cities this means that nature plays an important role in her stories.

Today, the Christmas Comics are still very popular. The beloved classic editions are reprinted, some are a mixture of new and old stories, and there are always some new editions too, presented in a slim 16 page horizontal format in

DA REVEN VAR GJETAR

Det var ein gong ei kone som skulle ut og leiga seg gjetar. Så møtte ho ein bjørn. – Kvar skal du? spurde bjørnen. – Å, eg skal ut og leiga meg gjetar, svara kona.

– Vil du ikkje ha meg? spurde bjørnen. – Jau, berre du kan lokka så, sa kona. – Hø-i, sa bjørnen. – Nei, deg vil eg ikkje ha til gjetar, sa kona og gjekk sin veg.

Då kona hadde gått eit stykke til, møtte ho ein ulv. – Kvar skal du? sa ulven. – Eg skal ut og leiga meg gjetar, svara kona. – Men det er visst ikkje heilt lett.

Click on Globe returns to contents

full colour.

Comics in Norway cover a wide range of genres for various age groups. For the younger end of the market, the weekly **Donald Duck** comic has been popular since 1948, and currently sells a staggering 185,000 copies an issue. (That's more copies than **X-Men**, true believers!) For the older reader, monthly comics that reprint newspaper strips are very popular; **Tommy and Tigern (Calvin and Hobbes)**, **Billy (Beetle Bailey)**, and **Garfield**, to name but a few. Many Norwegian comics have Swedish language editions too, identical except for the translations.

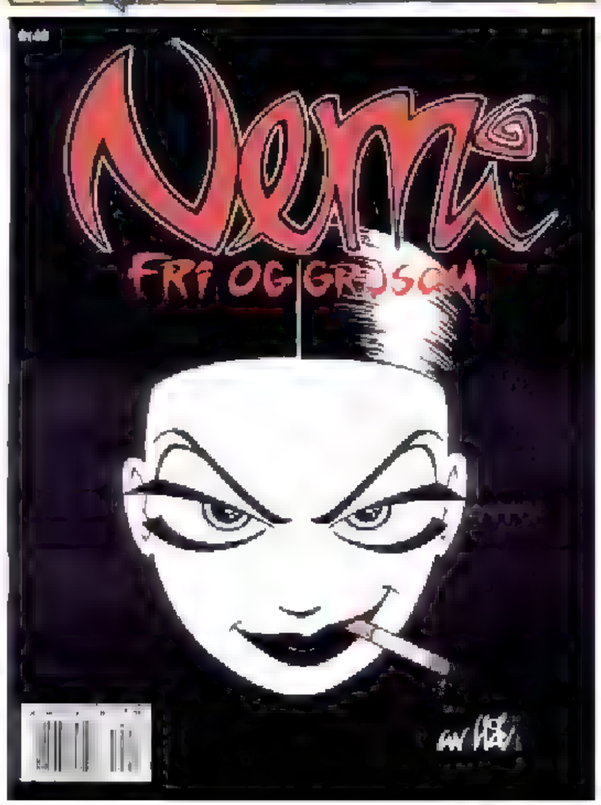
Unlike the Christmas Comics, the format of most Norwegian comics is very similar in size to American comic books, but with newspaper gag strips running four to a page. While the title strip takes up the lead, other strips are used to fill out the rest of the 52 to 60 pages to provide a good mixture of content. Many of these strips are often by Norwegian creators. For instance, while **Larson's Gale Verden** (which stars Gary Larson's Far Side cartoons) features other US strips such as **Fox Trot** and **Dilbert**, it also runs a strip called **Nemi** (rhymes with semi-) by the Oslo based cartoonist Lise Myhre. A professional cartoonist since 1996, Lise created **Nemi** in late 1997. "Nemi is a girl in her late twenties. She hangs out in bars, listens to goth music and heavy metal", explains her creator. "Nemi is single...but not desperate to get a guy. She's very strong in some ways, but also a dreamer and wishes the world would be more like it is in fairy tales sometimes."

Nemi sounds so much fun you find yourself wondering if she's free for lunch. Not surprisingly, the character is well loved by her readers, due to Lise having a great sense of comedy timing. The strip is genuinely funny, and sometimes touching (but never call it "bittersweet" or Nemi would kick your ass). **Nemi** appears every day in several newspapers in Norway as well as in Sweden's largest newspaper and on assorted sites on the internet. There have also been three **Nemi** albums published, with a fourth due any day now. The popularity of the character was evident at Raptus, with Lise doing a two hour book signing for her legion of fans, and another unofficial hour outside when she nipped out for a smoke.

Humour comics are very popular in Norway. Maybe it's because their content isn't forcibly dumbed-down for a young market, as has happened in the UK. With their tradition of basing comics around newspaper strip characters, the humour tends to rely on wit rather than on schoolboy pranks. Not that the comedy is too cerebral of course! No one could accuse the star of Frode Ølverli's **Pondus** of being mature! **Pondus** is the next best-selling comic in Norway after **Donald Duck**. Currently selling 50,000 copies an issue, the 60 page monthly stars an everyman-type character. "Pondus is a football fanatic, a bus driver and a family man", says his creator, Frode Ølverli. "Obviously, considering his age, he´s supposed to act as an adult, but inside of him there´s a kid who refuses to let go . Sounds familiar? I guess we all feel like this every now and then."

Frode created **Pondus** in 1996, when the strip began in local newspapers. That year also saw the character feature in the popular **Ernie** comic. Today, the strip appears in approximately 30 different newspapers in Norway, Sweden and Finland, as well as its own comic, and there have been five albums collecting it. The latest

JEG KAN IKKE HUSKE JEG HAR BLITT PRAKET TIL LYSTIGE LAG OG FESTER.
HEIA OSS SNAKKE OM DEG.
LEI AV VERDEN?
HAR DU GLEMT AT DET ER DU SOM FORMER DEN?
ALT ER STJERNESKYN OG UENDELIG. NEMI: VERDEN ER IKKE SVART ELLER HVIT - MAN BARE VELGER HVILKE BYGNINGER MAN SKAL BRYTE DEN GJENNOM OG DU HAR VALGT DINE EGNE!



Click on Globe returns to contents

album, a whopping hardback called **Første Omgang** , was launched at Raptus, with Frode cornered by readers for a marathon signing session. "**Første Omgang** means First Half," explains Frode, "so if you can come up with a clever name for book number two I'll buy you a pint." A generous offer indeed, considering that beer costs around a fiver a pint in Norway. How about "Second Half", Frode? And mine's a lager.

Like Lise, and many other Scandinavian creators, Frode is both a writer and artist. Another of his strips, **Risk-hospitalet** (Risky Hospital) ran for a while in **Herman Hedning** comic. Frode's style is instantly recognisable. His pen line is fluid, his characters are hilarious, and he has the reputation of drawing the ugliest women ever seen in comics (intentionally, I might add).

While the long Norwegian winter nights are surely brightened up by so many humour comics, they're not the only prevalent genre in Scandinavia. Adventure comics have always been popular too. Again, repackaged newspaper strips often make up the lead strips for such comics. The 100-page **Agent X9** monthly features the classic **Rip Kirby** strips by Alex Raymond, along with **Modesty Blaise** and Will Eisner's **Spirit**. Reprints of the UK's **Garth** and **Judge Dredd** have also appeared in Norwegian monthlies, but the most popular adventure comic by far is **Fantomet (The Phantom)**.

Lee Falk's classic superhero (who predates both Superman and Batman) made his debut as an American newspaper strip in 1936. However, while **The Phantom** is held in little regard by American comic book fans today, it is appreciated with great esteem in Norway. In Jerry Robinson's excellent 1974 book **The Comics**, Falk recounted how, during World War 2, the German occupation of Norway led to the Nazis controlling the press. The Norwegian daily newspapers printed untrue stories of America being bombed and losing the war. "But at the same time", said Falk, "**The Phantom** (strips were) being smuggled across the border from Sweden and were being printed in

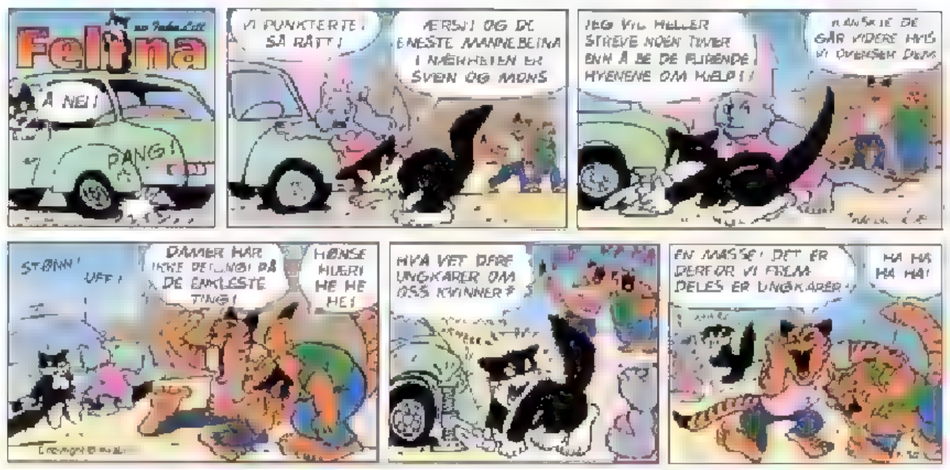
those same papers". The Norwegians knew they were American strips, but the Germans did not. "While their controlled newspapers were telling them each day that the USA (and other Allies) was in ashes, **The Phantom** kept appearing", said Falk, "thus assuring readers that the USA was still going strong."

The Phantom has been popular in Norway ever since. A comic called **Fantomet Heftet** (The Phantom Magazine) was published from 1952-1954, and the current **Fantomet** comic has been appearing since 1964 and sells around 30,000 copies every two weeks. The title now contains new stories which originate from Sweden, although special issues featuring classic strips still appear too. Back up strips cover a wide range, from **Prince Valiant** and **Flash Gordon** to humour strips and classic **House of Mystery** reprints. All in all, a quality package.

Other superheroes have appeared in Norwegian comics, and still do. Both DC and Marvel have had Norwegian editions of their characters appearing with varying degrees of success over the years. Todd McFarlane's **Spawn** is translated into Norwegian every month, yet **The Phantom** still remains the most popular. Why should this be? Frode Haaland, organiser of the Raptus festival, has a theory: "The American Phantom is dark, grim and a loner. He fights for justice, but feels more like pre-Crisis Superman to me." Frode continues: "The Norwegian version (which includes Scandinavia and Australia, I think) has a wife and two kids, friends (local tribe, police etc.) and a separate home in the trees. The stories might involve his family or a crisis more related to his environment. This might be one of the reasons why the Phantom is so popular. He is actually a common guy (though with a lot of muscles) who fights for what he (and most people in the world) believes to be right. He stands up for the innocent and weak. He fights corruption, crime, drugs, alcohol and all the different

aspects that you read about. But still he has a home and family to tend to. The stories are not as gloomy as the others and the pages feel 'lighter' since it's not focused on the 'dark/nightly' side of The Phantom." A fair point. "And our Phantom has a blue costume, not 'kinky' purple", jokes Frode.

Most Norwegian comics appeal to all ages. Nevertheless, they do have comics which specifically target the adult market. One such comic is **Magnum** monthly, which features the T&A strip **Cat Claw** by Bane Kerac, where lingerie and leather-clad superheroines fall into danger and out of their costumes. Several years ago, when writer/editor Dag E. Kolsad created the humour anthology **Pyton**, it too was aimed at the adult market, and met with great acclaim. Its no holds barred comedy proved to be a huge sales hit. One of its artists/writers, Bjørn Ousland, was a student at the

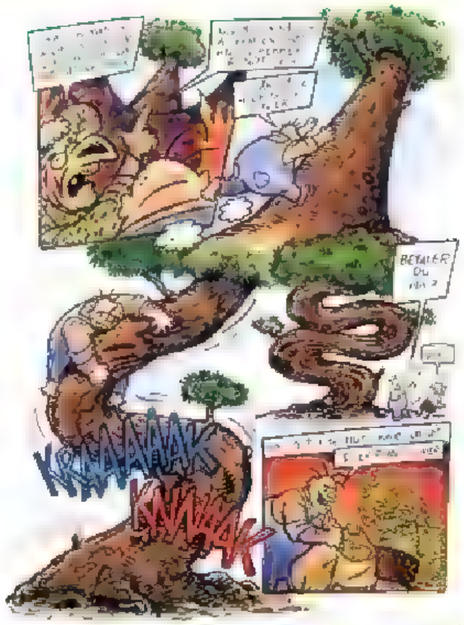

Felina
Å NEI!
PANG!
VI PUNKTERTE! SÅ RÅTT!
ÆRSJ! OG DE ENESTE MANNSBILDA I NÆRHETEN ER SVEIN OG MONS
JEG VIL HELLER STRIVE NOEN TIMER ENN Å BE DE FLYRENDE HYENENE OM HJELP!!
KANSKJE DE GÅR VIDERE HVIS VI OVERSER DEM
STØNN!
UFF!
DAMMER HAR IKKE PELUNGI PÅ DE ENKLESTE TING!
HØNSE HUERI HE HE HE!
HVA VET DERE UNGKARER OM OSS KVINNER?
EN MASSE! DET ER DERFOR VI FILM DELES ER UNGKARER!
HA HA HA HA!

Click on Globe returns to contents

Joe Kubert School of Comics and Graphics Art in the USA from 1982 to 1985, after which he turned professional and has contributed to Norwegian comics in a variety of styles. He won The Department of Culture's Award for the trilogy of albums called **Solrun's Saga** (1988-93) which are considered to be one of the main works of historical comics in Norway. The series features Norway during and after the Black Plague and was appreciated for its insight into another era and its depiction of powerful personal dramas. More recently, Bjørn has adapted old Norwegian folk tales with the graphic novels **Mumle Gåsegg** (1999) and the all new **Soria Moria Slott**. He has also published **Amfibius Rex** (2000), a new story utilising elements from folk tales.

Trolls, sea snakes, witches and other aspects of folk tales are also used in the stories of the children's character **Felina**, by InkaLill. A gently humorous funny animal strip, **Felina** began in **Norsk Barneblad** in 1993 and, like other popular Norwegian strips, also appeared in several newspapers. In recent years, InkaLill has produced serials featuring Felina for the comic **Adresseavisen**. There, the longest story ran to 57 pages, where Felina went back in time to the days of the Vikings and became a singer for the heathen ruler of Norway, Haakon Thain.

InkaLill has also produced another fantasy series, **The Knights of Dor**, which numbers seven self-contained albums. She has won awards for her strips, and she is currently working on her most ambitious project yet. "I



have finished the first story, called *The Colour Man*, and the next is *The Daughter Deliverers*", says the artist/writer. "This project is the thing I've wanted to do all my life. I see it as 10 books of 200 pages each. The first book will contain four stories; *The Colour Man*, *The Daughter Deliverers*, *The Battle of Sharp Hill* and *The Battle of Aruba*. It is sheer pleasure to work on it", enthuses InkaLill, and given her impressive track record one can believe she will easily accomplish her goal.

Unlike the current situation in Britain and America, comics in Norway are easily available on newsstands, at kiosks, supermarkets and at the airport. The average chunky 60 page colour comic is reasonably priced at around £2, and there are also shops selling stacks of second-hand comics below cover price! (Take yer price guides and get outta town, speculators!) There are also comics speciality stores selling the latest issues, plus American imports. Although superhero comics are not the hot items they are in the States, Marvel's **Conan** comics have been translated into Norwegian and do extremely well, which is why John Buscema was a guest at Raptus in 1999, along with Sergio Aragonés and Stan Sakai, whose **Groo** and **Usagi Yojimbo** comics are other favourites of Scandinavian readers.

With comics being so plentiful on the newsstands, it's easy to forget that Norway also has an expanding small press scene. Some artists have formed their own company, Jippi, and publish a 68 page anthology called **Forresten** twice a year, as well as solo projects. One of the artists that Jippi likes to promote is Jason (many Norwegian artists decline to use their surnames professionally). His strip **Lomma full av regn** (Pocket full of rain) was in the magazine **Tegn** and won the Norwegian Comics Association's award for best comic. In 1997 he won a major comic strip competition run by one of the biggest Norwegian newspapers, **Dagbladet**, and was picked from among some 250 entrants. His unique moody style can be seen in a Fantagraphics translation of his album **Vent litt...**, available in English as **Hey Wait...**

The two main publishers of comics in Norway are Egmont and Bladkompaniet, who between them publish 30-50 comics a month. Although this article has only scratched the surface of the Norwegian comics scene, it makes it obvious that comics can appeal to the general public if they're not dumbed down or restricted to the transient fad of adapting the latest toy or TV series.

For a country that has a population of only four million, comics are read by a large percentage of Norwegians. If only publishers in the UK had the same faith in the medium, instead of giving up the ghost. Has it ever occurred to UK publishers that kids aren't interested in comics in Britain because there are no longer any interesting comics for them to read?

As every student of Norse mythology (and Marvel's **Thor**) knows, the fabled Asgard was the home of the mighty Norse Gods. The old gods may be gone now, but at the end of the Rainbow Bridge are the new Asgardians; the creators of the thriving Norwegian comics industry.

Thanks to Arild Wærness, Frode Ølverli, Frode Haaland, InkaLill, and Lise for their help in researching this feature. Raptus 2002 will again be at the Grieghallen, Bergen, and runs across the weekend of 6th to 8th September 2002. Book your flights now! www.raptus.no/

Lew Stringer has been a freelance comics artist/writer in British comics since 1983. His current work includes Tranny Magnet for the adult comic ***Viz*** *and Fororts Satanisterna (Suburban Satanists) for the Swedish comic* ***Herman Hedning****.*

Illustrations used: *AgentX9: Monthly 100 page comic which reprints Secret Agent Corrigan, The Spirit, Rip Kirby and suchlike. © Egmont/King Features*
Cat Claw: Adult sexy superhero comic. © Strip Art Features.
Fantomet: ©King Features Syndicate.
Felina: InkaLill's popular comedy cat strip. ©InkaLill
Guests: The guests of Raptus 99 on a quest to find the hammer of Thor! Left to right: John Buscema, Stan Sakai, Patrik Norrman (Bacon & Egg), Arild Wærness (Raptus organiser); Jonas Darnell (Herman Hedning); Jim Toomey (Sherman's Lagoon); and Sergio Aragonés in the foreground. Photo: Lew Stringer
Larsons: The Far Side has its own monthly comic in Norway, with many other strips included too. ©2001 FarWorks Inc/ Bladkompaniet
Mumle: A page from Bjørn Ousland's graphic novel, Mumle Gasegg. ©Bjørn Ousland and TEGN A/L Bum 1999.
Nemi: Lise's popular Nemi character meets...Alice Cooper? From the Nemi album, Free and Gruesome. ©2001 Lise and Bladkompaniet.
Nemi cover: Lise's striking cover to the album Nemi: Free and Gruesome. ©2001 Lise and Bladkompaniet.
Pondus cover: After Donald Duck, the most popular comic in Norway! Frode Ølverli's Pondus. ©Frode Ølverli/Bladkompaniet 2001
Tuss: Cover to one of the traditional Christmas Comics which feature stories influenced by Norwegian folk tales. This artwork is by Solveig Muren Sanden, who is still drawing today, aged 83! ©Norsk Barneblad 1995
Xmas Comic: An example of Solveig Muren Sanden's strip art from Tuss and Troll. ©Norsk Barneblad 1995

Click on Globe returns to contents

VERDICT COMICS REVIEWS

THIS MONTH'S JURY:

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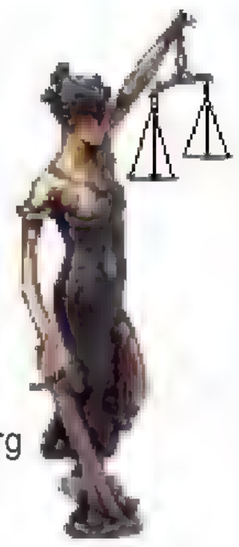
Andy Cheverton
Jennifer Cole
Kelvin Green
Phil Hall
Rol Hirst
Nigel Lowrey
Andrew Lewis
Ross Richie
Kevin Schomburg
Mike Sivier
Andy Winter



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The Amazing Spider-Man #36
Marvel
By J. Michael Straczynski & John Romita Jr.

Less than a month after I complained in my The Blank Page column that Marvel's Max Comics imprint was tackling a mature readers' version of superheroes in the real world with incompetence and poor taste, and Straczynski shows us all how it can be done, and done well, and done with a purpose.

In this issue, Spidey - blurring the fictive line between his world and ours - witnesses the fall of the World Trade Centre and helps out in the aftermath. While Straczynski's main purpose here is to send a message out to the world, both at home and abroad, he does it in such a clever way that he also explains why no Marvel heroes were available to prevent the attack, and also why they weren't visible on television helping to rescue the few survivors from the rubble. It's a small point - and perhaps a negligible one, in the scheme of things - but it ties the Marvel Universe with our own in a fascinating and emotive fashion.

As a human being, one cannot fail to be touched by the grim reality of this issue, by its quiet dignity and noble determination, by its message of revenge and tolerance together, one tempered in the flames of the other.

As a reader, whether of comics or books or any sort of fiction, one can again wonder at how words on a page and characters made only of those words and readers' imagination, can live and breathe and inform you about your own life and the world you inhabit in ways you might not normally consider.

If it stumbles - and it is more a misstep than a stumble, in truth - it would be in the use of Doctor Doom as the bad guy to shed a tear at the tragedy. When, on the same page, one has Magneto and the Kingpin, who can more realistically sympathise with the loss of innocent life, it is perhaps erroneous to consider Doom to be so moved. This is not in the way of a fanboy niggle, but, as soon as you realise that Doom has such compassion, he is reduced as a dictator, a tyrant, a megalomaniac, and becomes a simple villain. It is the one moment of broken continuity when I remembered that this was a comic book, and it works against the complete mastery of the rest of the issue.

This is what Marvel should be striving for when they aim to target a mature reader base; comics bereft of explicit sex and profanity and over-the-top violence - in every sense, comics for the mature reader. If only it could have been born of better circumstances.

The Verdict: There's little one can say when presented with a work such as this. Straczynski is, first and foremost and in the best way, a writer and we are lucky to have him working in comics. (AC)

Ancient Joe #1
Dark Horse/Maverick
By C. Scott Morse

Morse is quite easily one of the most gifted and original creators working on the fringes of mainstream comics, and his character Ancient Joe is pitched somewhere between Gaiman's Sandman and Ernest Hemingway. Think about how cool that sounds for a minute...

In this issue, Joe meets up with his old friend Benny in order to ask for his help; Joe needs to travel to Hell to save his dead wife's soul from El Diablo, whom Joe once tricked and robbed. But the only payment he can offer Benny is the silver he stole from El Diablo, and Benny doesn't want anything to do with that. So Benny asks for the privilege of boxing Joe as his payment.

Morse uses a tiered, four-panel page design throughout the whole issue, which gives a steady pace to the story, as well as a decent widescreen feel, effective in the talking heads sections as well as the fighting scenes. It also means that the story is entirely uncluttered, reading like a dream in more ways than one.

The only thing to be said against this comic is nothing to do with Morse - there are no adverts printed herein, and the issue is subsequently priced at $3.50 as a result. Whether you would prefer to pay more for an ad-free read is your business, but Morse might have reaped the benefit of garnering more readers if his comic had been priced more competitively.

The Verdict: If the concept of a hard-drinking, fist-fighting Sandman analogue appeals, then this is for you. (AC)

Avengers #47
Marvel
By Kurt Busiek, Manuel Garcia, Bob Layton

This is one of those rare issues in which a team book focuses on one particular member, to the exclusion of the others. The member in the spotlight here is Warbird, the former Ms Marvel who was seduced by Immortus's son Marcus around issue 200 of the original Avengers series.

Here, she is more or less seduced by Kang's son Marcus while trying to prevent the Master of the World (he's from Alpha Flight, by the way) from making his own play for global domination. Meanwhile, we're all still waiting for the big fight with Kang. It can't be long now – Busiek's leaving after issue 50!

It's laudable that Marvel feels comfortable with publishing stories which attempt to expand on characters' personalities. Hopefully, Busiek will prove a big enough writer

Click on Globe returns to contents

not to let history repeat itself in a predictable way.

Tasty cover by incoming penciller Kieron Dwyer, too.

The Verdict: Some might see this as padding to make the whole big Kang saga last a bit longer. We won't know the truth until the story's payoff. (MS)

Bento: Story Art Box
Kent Williams and Allen Spiegel Fine Arts
By Various Creators

This is either a very expensive magazine or an oversized and expensive book of short stories - I can't decide which - and it contains short stories by various people, some of whom have worked in the field of comics.

There's one by Neil Gaiman, which is darker and more explicit than fans of his comics might expect, and one by ex-Vertigo editor Alisa Kwitney that is absolutely bizarre and quite beautiful. Doom Patrol writer Rachel Pollack contributes a story that I couldn't finish, which is how I felt about her Doom Patrol, so it's reassuring to find that neither of us have changed much in the intervening years. Iain Sinclair's story might have been better if its ending hadn't been interfered with by the typesetting, which led me straight across the page and into the end of someone else's story before I had realised what was happening. It just didn't feel the same after that.

Each of these stories has full page illustrations to accompany it; if you like Kent Williams, then you'll like these, as they almost all look like his work, even though they're not. He did do the cover, and that looks like Kent Williams, but for altogether more logical reasons.

I bought this for the Jonathan Carroll story, however, and that is short and wonderful and managed to be about different things both times that I read it. I'd happily recommend this whole package just for that, but you'll need to bear in mind that I forked out $14 solely for Carroll's story and am slightly biased in that respect.

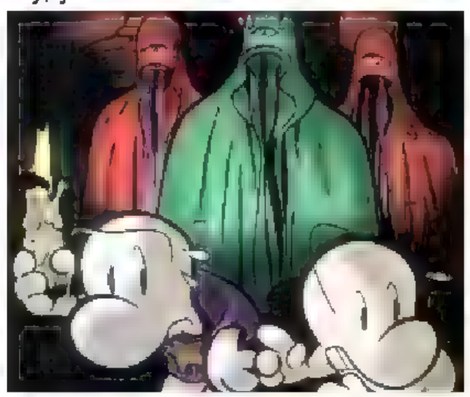
Finally, for traditional comics fans, there is a 12 page Dave McKean comic that is impossible to describe, as it is a predominantly visual story and is something of a masterpiece. I don't normally like McKean's work, but this is one of the most touching and clever things I've read, and it's all the better for being something that could only be told as well as it is in a visual format like the comic strip.

The Verdict: Three excellent stories - the Carroll, Gaiman and Kwitney - and an inspiring McKean strip make this worth a look, if not quite worth your money. (AC)

Bone #45
Cartoon Books
By Jeff Smith

The Bones (together with Rose and her Thorn) arrive in the city of Atheia to find all is not well. The city has been taken over by the Vedu, "the order of the Dreaming Eye", and Thorn is attacked by Briar.

This is another solid chapter in the Bone saga - a story we can tell is building to its climax. It's a fantasy story; when they get to the big walled city, you know the full flash finish is heading for you with all the weight of a runaway juggernaut.



The Verdict: Many classic novels were written as partworks; this is a classic comics novel in the making. (MS)

Cerebus #271
By Dave Sim and Gerhard
Aardvark-Vanaheim

Four months later and he's *still* tied to a chair in a chapel run by the Three Stooges! "If *Cerebus* be bound so long Cerebus could plotz" indeed! (What *is* plotzing, anyway?)

It's enough to make any reader go queer in the head. Fortunately for us, Cerebus starts doing exactly that in the story - so we don't have to.

The Sarah Butts story is fantastic, though. In fact, this must be the month for characters to cough up their lungs, because that happens both here and in Liberty Meadows.

And the bit about the Big Pile of Naked, Beautiful Girls.

And the bit when Cerebus turns into a superhero. Only 29 months left to go, folks...

The Verdict: It should be boring; it isn't. Why aren't you reading this? (MS)

The Crusades #9
Vertigo
Steven T. Seagle and Kelley Jones

You'll need to bear with me a bit here. You see; there's this knight tearing around contemporary San Francisco chopping up evildoers, plus a few innocent bystanders who weren't so quick at getting out of the way as might have been advisable, and the police can neither find him nor stop him (in fact, the police haven't even *seen* him). This situation works against local mob boss The Pope (who has sent out one of his men dressed as the Knight for his own purposes) and for Anton Marx, a local shock jock who is exploiting the Knight in order to boost his own popularity.

This faintly ridiculous premise (parts of which will seem eerily familiar to fans of *The Fisher King*) shouldn't work, yet it does, largely due to the way that Seagle focuses his story around the various characters drawn into the larger story, rather than the mysterious and unexplained knight. Like his previous - and underrated - Vertigo series, House of Secrets, this is about character interaction and personal relationships, mixed with satire and commentary and bound around a fantastic theme.

Seagle is joined in this by Kelley Jones, one of those "love him or hate him" artists, who here seems obsessed with drawing the main female character bending down quite sharply with either her breasts or buttocks looming large within the panel. He also seems less than keen on drawing backgrounds. This is a shame because I love Jones's artwork, but here he doesn't seem to have an interest in drawing the whole thing, if you see what I mean.

The Verdict: Relentlessly bizarre and violent and quite distinctly odd. Bits of it don't work and bits of it are just plain mental. I like it. (AC)

Danger Girl Kamikaze #2
Cliffhanger
By Tommy Yune

You don't have to have read the previous issue to read this. I did, but the story was forgettable, so I forgot it. Sub-par manga artwork mixes with half-baked story to produce a big mess.

There is a gem in this quagmire, though. The wonderfully ambiguous "Based on your mission plan, which was cleverly encrypted and interleaved into your huge collection of bootleg mp3 files, I concluded that we both shared common objectives". Those would be to collect as many bootleg mp3s as possible, then? Thought so.

The Verdict: A semi-pretty waste of paper. (MS)

Elektra #4
Marvel Knights
By Brian Michael Bendis and Chuck Austen

Bendis continues his storytelling

Click on Globe returns to contents

experiments here, contributing a script that makes many demands on the artist. It's a shame, then, that the artist is Chuck Austen.

His art is ugly, in the most offensive and intrinsically awful way that only comics seem to get away with. That Bendis overwrites the entire issue is here a blessing since his over-inflated word balloons cover up as much artwork as possible. The script has Austen's art divided into two areas; two different TV broadcasts play across the top and bottom of each page, whilst the main story - largely a fight between Elektra and the Silver Samurai - takes up the middle section of the page. If you think that many static shots of talking heads sounds boring and repetitious then you plainly haven't seen what passes for an action scene according to Austen. Sheer storytelling incompetence bleaches each panel of any movement, any correlation between one panel and the next is simply absent and the flat, heavily-shadowed artwork means that as soon as more than two people appear in one panel you cannot tell one from the other.

Note to Marvel; we are buying this for Bendis's scripting. It is my guess that less people will buy it for Greg Rucka's scripting, so cut your losses now and give Rucka a decent artist to work with. Please.

The Verdict: This is quite easily the most unattractive thing to appear on paper since my Uncle Pete got the runs after a particularly bad curry. But at least he got better. (AC)

Elektra & Wolverine: The Redeemer #1

Marvel

By Greg Rucka and Yoshitaka Amano

The idea - the very *idea* - of publishing a comic that consisted of a prose story accompanied by painted illustrations by a Japanese videogame designer would have been laughable; not to you and me, but to the suits and moneymen who haunted Marvel's corridors and held the purse strings in their cold and bony grasp. It is a testament to Marvel's new outlook that such a project can nowadays be published and, if it fails on any count, they cannot be blamed for trying.

Rucka is a modern pulp writer, unconcerned with anything but communicating through words as efficiently as possible, and punctuating his tale with very occasional images of poetic beauty and insight. In this respect, he is in the classic tradition of the pulp writer. The story herein concerns a bungled assassination by Elektra that leads her into a confrontation with Logan; a tale sparingly told in words that fly by in short staccato bursts and longer, more breathless sentences. You could take a breath at every comma and still run short of wind.

Amano forgoes the lush and painted vision he brought to the Sandman: The Dream Hunters novel, contributing sketchier, frantic illustrations that suit the pace of the story. In the week that Lucy Liu was reported to be up for the role of Elektra in the Daredevil movie, it is interesting to see Amano's portrayal of her as a slim, black leather-clad Asian woman. It is a shame, though, that many of the paintings differ from the story in certain respects and that the continuity between text and illustration couldn't have been better maintained.

The Verdict: A simple, pared down piece of pulp fiction and some quite beautiful paintings make this an experiment for Marvel, and a largely successful one. (AC)

Fantastic Four #49

Marvel

By Carlos Pacheco and various artists

Over the last two years Carlos Pacheco has systematically restored the Fantastic Four to a mid 70s/early 80s status quo while making the book seem fresher and more vibrant than it has in years. By this, his final issue, the FF are back in (a souped-up modern version of) their traditional Baxter Building HQ and (souped-up modern versions of) their mid-70s costumes, Franklin is back from space and Valeria, the Claremont-induced daughter from an alternate future is - well, that would be telling. Where do you think Valeria came from? Unless you've read this issue already, I'll bet you're wrong.

Pacheco finishes his run on a real tearjerker, reminding us that what makes the FF so special will always be the sense of family and family love that prevails. Oh, and the fact that Franklin Richards can tear the universe apart and rebuild it according to his wishes anytime he damned well pleases. Make sure you never forget that one.

The Verdict: Pacheco leaves a hard act to follow but some lovely plot developments for his successor to build on. (JC)

Fantastic Four 1234 #4

Marvel Knights

By Grant Morrison and Jae Lee

There was a palpable thrill to reading the opening of this issue, the finale of one of the most intriguing adventures of the FF I've ever read. In flashback, Reed Richards stands over the body of a woman vaporised for witnessing his weaker, more violent, side, before opening the door to a dark universe that allows this personality to manifest itself within Reed, a sort of dark mirror. Travelling the world, Reed trains with priests who enable him to extract this entity from himself, solidifying it into a living, man-like creature called a *tulpa*.

Reed names this being Victor (after the protagonist of Frankenstein) and, because it looks like Reed, it has an iron mask nailed to its face. Yeah... that's exactly what I thought.

But this new Marvel is still Marvel, where there is no change, only the illusion of change, and the more things change, the more they stay the same.

This is a crying shame; the sheer audacious logic of Morrison's origin of Doom is too good to only last three pages before being revealed as a story that never happened. There have been too many insipid and feeble stories based around these characters over the years. The notion that a group of scientific adventurers can form a family and live and play in the Marvel universe is ripe with possibilities, many of them untapped since the days of Stan and Jack and, to be fair, Byrne.

And to come to the end of this amazingly thought-out and presented series, only to be suckered with a false ending to such potential and power, is galling, to say the least.

The Verdict: This series has pushed at the boundaries of the concept, all within a Marvel PG rating and without FF fans creating a stink. A shame it couldn't go that little bit further. (AC)

Four Women #2

Homage Comics

By Sam Kieth

Trapped in their car, the four women of the title are helpless against the attempts by two strange men to gain entry to the vehicle and, ultimately, to the women themselves.

This is the most harrowing, cold, claustrophobic and emotionally charged comic I've read in a while. Kieth doesn't put a foot wrong, bookending this issue with the same scene repeated but with a different emphasis, and his portrayal of each woman tackling the situation in her own way is assured and believable.

All this and a final panel that should spell hope but will almost certainly muddle the story further.

The Verdict: Buy this now or buy the trade later. But, one way or another, buy this. (AC)

Fred the Clown v2 #1

Hotel Fred Press

By Roger Langridge

My wife doesn't really like comics much. She's put up with them for as long as she's known me, through richer and poorer and for better or for worse. She realised there was no hope for me back in 1990 when at some ungodly hour of the night, while she was fast asleep, I decided to read Gumby's Winter Fun Special (the one where Gumby and Pokey go to hell to rescue Santa Claus). Halfway through the comic the tears

Click on Globe returns to contents

were streaming down my face and, by the end of it, I had a rather perplexed wife glaring at me incandescently. I had been trying desperately not to laugh too much and subsequently was just a blob of quivering flesh - I must have looked a sad and pathetic case.

Now, I'd rate that particular Bob Burden and Art Adams comic as possibly the most surreal and uproariously funny comic I'd ever read, but I might be inclined to change my mind after reading New Zealander Langridge's Fred the Clown #1. This is Betty Boop meets Little Nemo meets Monty Python meets the bastard offspring of Spike Milligan and Peter Sellars. If all NZ culture is anything like this then bollocks to the big hole in the ozone layer, I'm emigrating!

This is a comic in the great British tradition of short skits, single page humour and the wildly absurd. While I wouldn't say it was the funniest comic I've ever read, it is the best thing I've read in the last ten years. I've read it again and again since receiving it and it still makes me laugh out loud in places and if that isn't the best possible advertisement for it, I don't know what is.

The Verdict: Buy this comic or the clown gets it! (PH)

Giant Sized Powers Annual
Image
By Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Avon Oeming

This reprint of Powers #½ comes as a nice surprise. Not because it's bigger than it was meant to be, because it's also pricier than it was meant to be, but because Walker and Pilgrim actually solve the case in this story. If there is one criticism to be levelled at the monthly series, it would be that the solution to each crime tends to fall into the officers' laps more by accident than any sort of detective work. This may be an attempt at realism, but it's dulled by repetition.

Lame superhero Tommy "The Shark" Mills is discovered crying over the recently dead body of lame super-villain T. R. K. Why? Good question. The rest of the issue is padded out with a transcript of the subsequent court case against Mills, and half a dozen pages of sketches. Why? Good question.

The transcript provides an interesting counterpoint and afterword to the main story. The courtroom sketches by Oeming are nicely pencilled, revealing a softer side to his often stark inking. Whether you like this experiment in storytelling will depend on whether you like to buy a comic and end up reading a book. Thousands of Cerebus readers didn't and voted with their wallets. The choice is yours.

One niggle, however: the transcript is, in common with most of Bendis's past output, littered with spelling and grammatical errors. If you are going to employ and give credit to your copy editor in your comic, it may be of benefit to have them proofread said comic. Just a thought.

The Verdict: Like Powers #13, this is an experiment and will stand or fall depending on personal preference. You may feel touched by genius or ripped off to the tune of $3.95 for 13 pages of comic. I liked it, but don't come moaning to me if you don't. (AC)

Grendel: The Devil Inside #3
Dark Horse/Maverick
By Matt Wagner and Bernie Mireault

This is the final issue of this particular Grendel storyline, as Brian Li Sung becomes possessed by Grendel even as he is pursued by the policeman Wiggins. But who, truly, is the possessor and who is the pursuer?

Brian's journal becomes a stream of consciousness, where even he cannot tell where he begins and Grendel ends. Grendel's scrawled commentaries intertwine the panels, revelling in the fight for possession of Brian even as its true motivations and intents remain unclear. This was the first Grendel storyline to have its main character, as well as the readership, fully aware of Grendel as an outside force, and it is a credit to Wagner that it is done so subtly, as it makes the dawning realisation that much more effective.

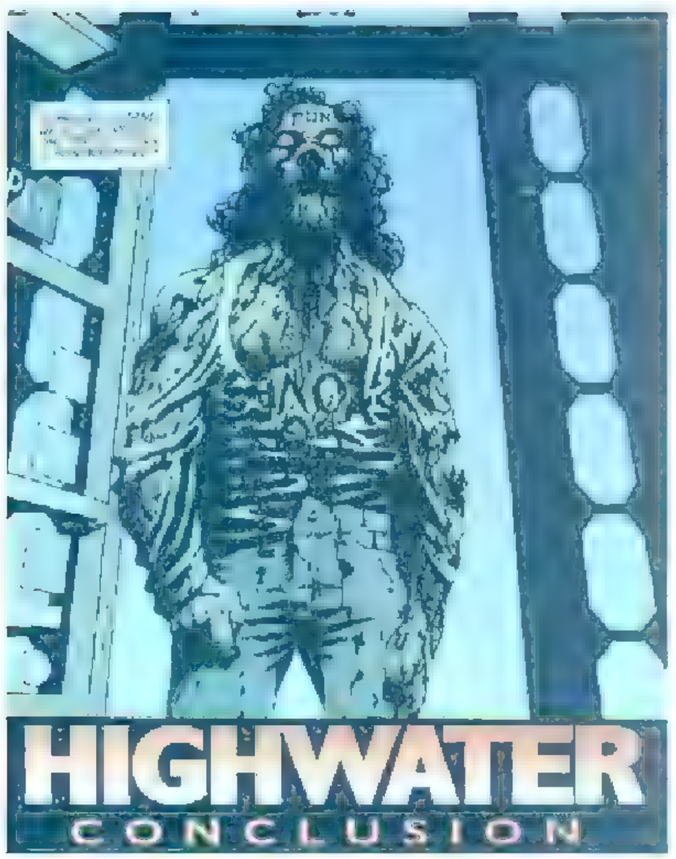
Reading it again in this series, I'm struck by how powerful and understated the entire package is, both in art and story and in that elusive middle ground where they both mesh and work together. Always my favourite storyline of the Grendel comics, this has only reminded me of how different and groundbreaking this truly is, and how so few comics since have taken up its unspoken challenge to push and break the boundaries that so often are taken as read to exist in comics, but can be tossed aside to create something new and daring.

The Verdict: More than a decade old and still more innovative and experimental than anything available in commercial mainstream comics, then or since. (AC)

Hellblazer #167
Vertigo
By Brian Azzarello and Marcelo Frusin

And so *Highwater*, the latest instalment of Constantine's American odyssey, ends. Brian Azzarello still refuses to entangle himself in the elements which made this title so successful in the first place - the protagonist's acerbic narration; a superfluity of horned (and at times horny) demons; barbed assaults on the British establishment in its various guises. Instead the writer chooses to set his own jaded agenda, with references back to his debut story of John's imprisonment and further clues as to just what exactly happened in the time between these stories and Warren Ellis's beautifully sick little vignettes.

Vertigo are already labelling this story "John Constantine's most controversial adventure". But Editor Tony Bedard's "On the Ledge" column in issue #167 seemed almost to beg readers who have fallen by the wayside to pick this comic up again, to give it another chance. Normally reserved for shameless promotion of new titles, it was alarming to see Vertigo's choice to use this slot to convince us that Azzarello's John Constantine is still Delano's Constantine, Ennis's Constantine, even Jenkins' and Ellis's Constantine. Especially so when the evidence should speak for itself. Skinhead boot-boys, ghosts of the dead, religious zealots - all were there in the first few issues all those years ago. And all are here in *Highwater*. So why do I still get the impression I'm reading a completely different comic?



Now, don't get me wrong, I like Azzarello's writing. 100 Bullets is mesmerising and beautifully plotted. In his defence, it cannot be denied that his is an individual voice and Hellblazer over the last year or so has certainly been his comic. Most impressive in each of Azzarello's stories (with the possible exception of the ill-advised nonsense in the previous story arc to this) and certainly marked here too is an acute sense of menace. What's hinted at is often more terrifying than what's seen.

I'm less comfortable with the presentation of Constantine himself. Where are the wisecracks? Where's his vulnerability? The jumping out of moving vehicles and landing smack on his arse qualities which made him more believable and more empathetic than all the interminable legions of spandex-clad air-brushed tossers in other comics? At times I can't help feeling Azzarello's been reading too much Paddington Bear and has inadvertently imbued Constantine with little more characterisation than the cuddly fellow's

Click on Globe returns to contents

trademark "long, hard stares".

As a story, this tale of ruptured families, Nazi bigotry and conspiracy theories is worthy enough for one of Vertigo's flagship titles. But why does everything have to move so slowly? What would have taken five or six pages at the most under previous writers of this title here takes 23. And back then JC would have also taken the opportunity to quote a few Doors lyrics or piss in the Devil's coffee depending on whether he was being written by Mr Delano or Mr Ennis.
The Verdict: Am I the only one who feels that in years to come Vertigo will look back on this run as an experiment which didn't really pay off? (AL)

Heroes
Marvel
By various writers and artists

It seems churlish to review a charity project, especially one produced in response to a decimating act of man not God, but this is the first of a number of charity comics due in aid of the Twin Towers Fund, so is worthy of interest.

This is, essentially, a gallery of images depicting, or in response to, the events of September 11 and, by and large, it is very successful. The inclusion of superheroes almost trivializes the true heroism of that day (J. Scott Campbell's grinning heroes being perhaps the most dubious image) although the frequent use of Captain America is to be expected and is often quite effective. Text is rare but usually quite affecting, and the majority of images are powerful and moving, with those by Joe Quesada being among the best.
The Verdict: A charity product that for once rises to expectations, and a fine tribute to those who fell and those who stood on that day. (NL)

Hunter: The Age of Magic #5
Vertigo
By Dylan Horrocks and Richard Case

The all new, all grown up Timothy Hunter continues his adventures in the follow-up to one of Vertigo's longest running series (The Books Of Magic), but I'm still not overly fond of the gigantic step towards maturity that the character has taken over the course of the last year. It has always been the main aim of The Books of Magic to show Timothy Hunter's development, not only as a magician, but as a human being. Horrocks keeps the reader in the dark about recent years in Tim's life. As much as it is probably thought through and planned to reveal Tim's latest development in small steps, I keep wishing I could have taken part in it by way of the original ongoing series.

The story is still a regular fantasy yarn: Tim meets a dragon, fights a demon entrapped in a sword, has to save a peaceful people from extinction and further deepens his relationship with Kalesh, his fellow student from the White School. Even though I would find it fruitful to transfer Tim back to England to bring some of the old magic back (after all Merlin belongs to the British Isles like scones to afternoon tea) I can't help finding Horrocks's story quite intriguing after all. His plot is slowly picking up speed; however, I'm still a bit puzzled by his pacing of single scenes. The author's continual over-use of dialogue-free panels and pages tends to slow down and speed up the reading process for no apparent reason - especially since Richard Case still shows no signs of improvement on the art, which, along with uninspired page layout, suffers from plain bad execution of single panels. I know Case can be a better artist and I wish he'd show it.

With the Harry Potter boom, which has taken the world by storm since the movie premiered recently, I also keep wondering if getting rid of young Timothy Hunter was such a smart move on DC's part; though I hope they cash in on the Potter boom by releasing collections of the Books Of Magic mini and ongoing series.

For all the criticism I have to offer I still look forward to every issue of Hunter: The Age of Magic and it still sits somewhere in the middle of my reading pile. If Horrocks would recall some of the traditional elements of the character of Timothy Hunter and Richard Case would just try a little harder this could actually become a good and enjoyable series one day. If you like classic fantasy, give it a try.
The Verdict: Shows signs of improvement after a disappointing start. Bring Tim back to England, Mr. Horrocks! (KS)

Image Introduces: Primate #1
Image
Beau Smith, Kevin Bernhardt and Mitch Byrd

I'm devastated. I've been a fan of Mitch Byrd for years, a severely under-rated artist, with a knack for good superhero books and quirky characterizations. This isn't a high point in his patchy career, by any stretch of the imagination.

If nothing else it proves that Beau Smith can't write his way out of a paper bag. Contrived and downright silly, Primate has no potential at all. It starts badly and just wanders down cliché lane until you realise that you're reading an updated version of *Mighty Joe Young*, with a bit of *King Kong* and *Gorillas in the Mist* thrown in for bad measure. Except that all three of those ape films had charm and grace, whereas Primate has all the qualities of that witless debacle of a film *Congo*.

Essentially this has been done before and better in various media, and this specimen does not add to the cache of interesting ape comics out there (Sky Ape, Monkeyman and O'Brien to name but two).
The Verdict: Save your money or give it to the World Wildlife Fund. (DRB)

The Incredible Hulk #34
Marvel
By Bruce Jones & John Romita Jr.

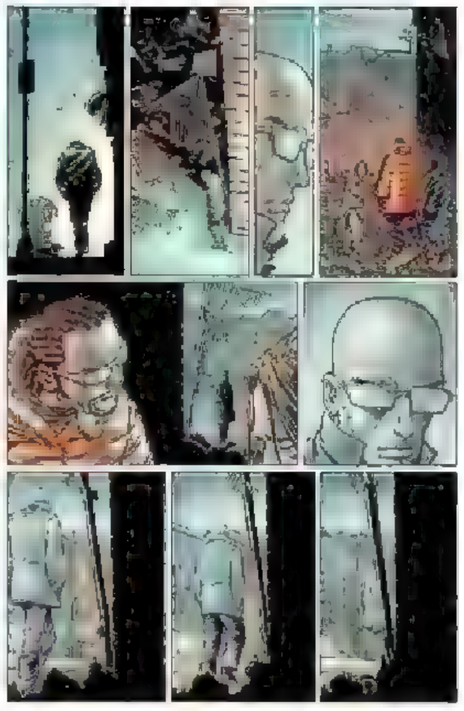
Now, I gave up on this title a few issues before Paul Jenkins did. Prior to that, I dropped it like a stone when Marvel dumped Peter David from the writing duties. I'm not interested in buying comics blindly - month in, month out - just because I like a particular character. There is a whole bunch of characters I like, but I want them well written.

So, the appointment of Bruce Jones as new Hulk writer intrigues me. I know Jones as a writer of short, snappy, twist-in-the-tail comics, many in collaboration with Bernie Wrightson, throughout the Seventies and Eighties and I don't remember ever buying a continuing monthly series by the man.

All of which makes this issue a good, fresh beginning.

Adopting the T.V. series' format of having Banner stop in a town and fighting evil as the Hulk before moving on may deter some writers. It certainly has connotations of unoriginality and an adherence to the formulaic. But it works very well here, in a simple enough story that is nevertheless loaded with little character touches that raise it nicely above the norm.

Romita Jr. is as reliable as ever. It's infuriating not to be able to say much that is new about such a reliable and gifted artist. But he is so good that he's drawing two monthly comics, and of how many other contemporary artists can you say that?
The Verdict: You know those greeting cards that play a little tune when you open them? If Marvel rigged this so that the end theme of The Incredible Hulk T.V. show played on the last two pages, it would be near perfect. (AC)



Click on Globe returns to contents

Judge Dredd Megazine #5
Rebellion
By various writers and artists

This issue's Dredd story, *Asylum*, continues the unholy creative alliance formed between Gordon Rennie and Frazer Irving that has already proved so shockingly wonderful in strips like *Necronauts* and *Reefer Madness* in 2000AD. At last fans get a chance to salivate over Irving's vision of Dredd. Beneath the shadowplay and showy monologues is a clever homage to the original Judge Death stories - there's even a girlie Psi-Judge on hand to pout and offer insights, although this time it's Karyn not Anderson. But while the original undead antagonist's impact over the years has diminished through over-exposure and reinvention as jester in the court of king Dredd, it is hard to imagine the Wurdolak creature suffering the same ignominy on its inevitable return.

In the final part of *Deep Blue Death*, Robbie Morrison and Steve Yeowell produce a stunningly paced story, engagingly told by a gorilla more civilized than the humans against whom he and his mistress, ex-Judge DeMarco, are pitted. This story is the real gem this issue. It's intelligent and unafraid to deal with "grown-up" topics. The smack-in-the-face resolution is comics writing at its best.

Conversely Dan Abnett's brave attempt to make the most wooden of characters and the most overused of Sci-Fi clichés work continues to fail disastrously. Dylan Teague's artwork is pretty enough, but it's hard to believe that *Wardog* is written by the man behind so many clever *Sinister Dexter* stories.

The reprints from past issues of 2000AD are both real crowd-pleasers. *Button Man II* is as carefully crafted by creators Wagner and Ranson as you'd expect. A real treat if it's new to you. *Flesh* is a lot of fun too, a kind of *Jurassic Park* with balls. And cowboys. My only gripe here is that the version of the stories published is not the original, but reprinted from compilations already resurrected in annuals during the 80s. Title logos are removed in places, and worse still, the pages are artificially elongated, the artwork tampered with to fit a resized page format.

Warren Ellis and D'Israeli's final *Lazarus Churchyard* offering is the most impressively scripted tale in this series about a "suicide-crazed unkillable junkie". *Finality*, perversely, deals with the protagonist's beginning - quite literally - though only a thorough examination of Ellis's worrying psyche could reveal whether the sequence in which Churchyard is conceived is meant to be poignant or disturbing. To be honest, it's both. The artwork too is more satisfying than previously, a contrast in styles and use of colour neatly separating the flashback sequence from the 500-years-in-the-future opening and conclusion.

The Verdict: Rebellion's makeover appears to be paying off, though considering the title of this comic more stories located in the world of Dredd wouldn't go amiss. (AL)

Justice League Adventures #1
DC
By Ty Templeton and Min S. Ku

Published to give the kids who watch Cartoon Network something to read, this is the latest of DC's comics based on their largely successful cartoon ventures. The idea is that great numbers of kids who watch the cartoon will want the comic, as will old-timers who would like to read a JLA comic that still makes some sort of basic sense. This is something that Superman Adventures and the various Batman Adventures have been doing for years, successfully satisfying two generations of fans simultaneously.

Except that Justice League Adventures is a quite pointless and incoherent mess.

It all starts off well. The cover, by Bruce Timm and Alex Ross, is absolutely beautiful; it feels like a thick, chunky read for the relatively cheap price of $1.99; and the fact that it is written by Templeton bodes well, for he was responsible for some of the best Batman stories ever during his run on Batman/Gotham Adventures.

Unfortunately, the reason that the comic is so thick is that as well as 22 pages of story there are 17 full-page ads continually endeavouring to bugger up its flow, a task in which they succeed admirably, aided as they are by an appallingly lacklustre and unfocused script. Templeton's tale is constructed almost entirely of coincidence and *deus ex machina*, at once predictable and difficult to follow, which is the most telling sort of ineptitude - to be able to know where the story is going despite its attempts to confuse you. The art is ugly and malproportioned, with little of the excitement and elegance that Parobeck and Burchett brought to Batman Adventures. It is more than distressing that comics aimed at kids should come to this.

The Verdict: Little more than an ad campaign for various toys, sweets, games and trainers, without even the pretence of a comics story, intended secondarily to encourage readers to watch the Justice League on TV where they can be exposed to more of the same. Absolutely deplorable. (AC)

Last Shot #2
Image
By Locke and Long Vo

One of Image's many manga-esque titles, this tells the story of a wandering gunslinger on a futuristic, or perhaps alien, world. There doesn't appear to be much substance to the plot, as this issue sees the meandering hero meet some raiders, fight them, then move on, and that's all.

There's not much here to suggest that this formula will not be repeated again and again with each issue, and even less to suggest that the lone, wandering gunslinger will develop beyond the cliché he currently embodies. Indeed, his sole distinguishing feature at this point is that he is allergic to rabbits!

The script is passable, although the accents of the faux-Mexican bandits introduced this issue are rather awful. The art is very attractive, and makes good use of the limited palette. However, the individual panels are a little too static, looking too much like individually posed pictures rather than movement captured in a frame. Each panel is also relatively large, adding to the lightweight feel of the story.

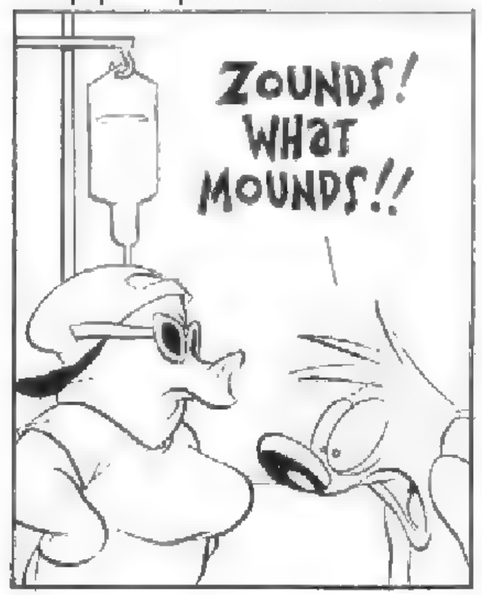
Rounding off the package, and perhaps included to add some kind of substance, is a sketchbook section which, although interesting, does little but highlight the weakness of the main feature.

The Verdict: On the current evidence, this is something of a weak title. It may get better, but there is nothing to suggest it in this issue. (KG)

Liberty Meadows #22
Insight Studios Group
By Frank Cho

Another great instalment of Monkeyboy Cho's newspaper strip reprint. Classic moments include the tour of Lib Meadows in which the place's creator gets thrown out of his own creation, the moment when Dean, the male chauvinist pig, coughs his lungs up (a cautionary tale for all you chain-smokers out there), and his subsequent mammary development. That's right - the operation to re-insert his lungs gives him breasts.

Behind the scenes, the big event this month is Cho's announcement that he is to cease creating LM as a newspaper strip to concentrate on the



Click on Globe returns to contents

comic - starting with the Liberty Meadows Wedding Album next year.
The Verdict: There must still be a bit of mileage in this comicbook industry if the newspaper guys want to jump ship onto it. (MS)

Lucifer #20
Vertigo
By Mike Carey & Dean Ormston

Carey uses an interesting method in this issue, interspersing his main in-continuity story with a separate tale of two teenagers, Sherri and Ewan, who manage to creep into Lucifer's Los Angeles stronghold, but who can't find their way out again. This creates some neat analogies within the story and also provides Lucifer with one of his coolest (and most character-defining) lines at the end when the two stories finally meet.

Ormston's art is, once again, quite perfect for this sort of dark comic; he can handle both our world and the other worlds of Lucifer's dark and varied cast equally, while managing to keep them all so obviously within the same universe. This title would benefit from having only the one artist, in order to give it some sort of defined and unified look; Ormston would be my choice.

It is satisfying, in these days when Gaiman is as much mocked as praised, that a writer of Carey's ability can make Gaiman's characters come alive again in a way so reminiscent of that writer. Equally satisfying is that it is done with freshness and without the sort of extreme violence and profanity that seems to pass for a Vertigo comic these days.

Just one question: does anyone know what 'Ras hoc opus hic la' means?
The Verdict: A rarity in the Vertigo stable, Lucifer is a well-planned and well-executed continuing story that is consistently interesting without needlessly pushing at the bounds of the mature readers label. (AC)

The Magdalena: Angelus ½
Top Cow/Image
By Marcia Chen, Brian Ching and Victor Llamas

So, this is a babe book with a difference? It's written by a woman, so you'd expect an insightful feel about the stuff that goes on in the heads of the lead characters. Think again. This could easily have been written by Tom DeFalco (if that isn't damning with faint praise I don't know what is).

It doesn't make a lot of sense, but then again I'm not familiar with the original series, so I suppose that has all the explanations you need. Bollocks does it. How can a comics company expect to attract new readers if they produce comics that are essentially designed just for those that bought an original series? Surely the selling point of The Magdalena is that it *isn't* your standard "bloke writes busty superheroine fantasy". Yet this issue ½ just ghettoises this product even further and makes you wonder what the marketing and editorial departments of these companies actually do and how they make any money at all. Or perhaps we already know...
The Verdict: More of a missed opportunity than a bad comic and it does give a whole new perspective to the idea of a horny woman! (DRB)

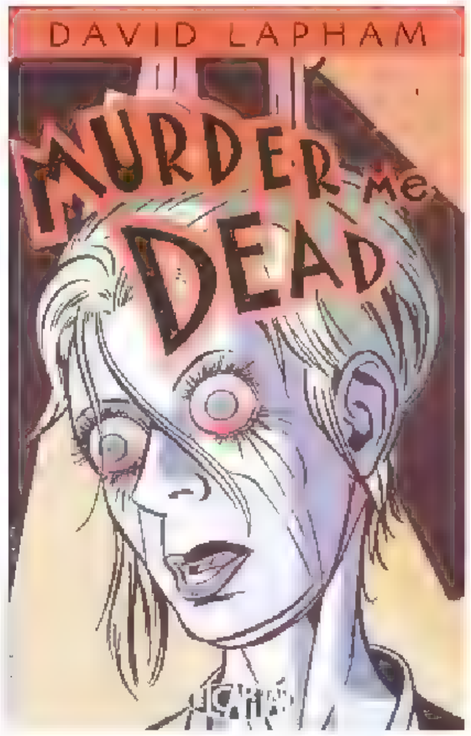
Murder Me Dead #9
By David Lapham
El Capitan

Long term readers of Lapham's independently produced Stray Bullets have felt on familiar territory throughout the run of this nine chapter, self-contained graphic novel. Dubbed "A Harrowing Comic" by its writer/artist creator, Murder Me Dead has offered us the plight of protagonist Steven Russell as he has stumbled naively through a noir world of femme fatales, hard-boiled detectives, family plots and mob violence. Along the way we have grown to mistrust and despise the manipulative Tara, the woman Steven was duped into going to prison for - and have screamed at the comic page as he has refused to give up his love for her...

And, in response to Lapham's aspiration at the end of issue nine, we have enjoyed the ride. Sure as hell.

So, this is the issue which ties everything up. A 70 page closing chapter to a 230 page series.

Most striking this issue is a central flashback sequence which can only be described as a tour de force of graphic storytelling. In a series already devoid of fancy-fancy captioning and clever-clever dialogue we are treated to a cinematic sequence of big screen suspense in what is the closest comics have ever come to emulating the heady heights of Hitchcock or the Coen Brothers. With many of the outsize frames wordless we are forced to plummet along at a breakneck pace, watching an appalling series of hitherto unseen events culminating in an atrocious pitch black finale.



All of which will leave you reaching for the back issues so that you can re-read the whole story, an eye open for the clues to what you now know really happened.

A good final issue will always leave you wanting more. The conclusion of Murder Me Dead is no exception. Although much of what has happened is neatly resolved, particularly the relationship between the two central characters, it's tempting to imagine some of the sub-plots or minor characters being more fully realised. Eve's ghastly mother, the cowardly Johnny the Pill and cold-tongued barman Gilberto would all warrant single issue specials of their own. However, Lapham's sense of relief in his comment at the end of this issue that he has finally been able to write "The End" on a story after 11 years in comics suggests that we are unlikely to see any kind of follow-up. A shame.
The Verdict: Those who have missed this series could do a lot worse than to seek out the collected edition, which is promised "before Christmas". The perfect antidote to spandex super-nonsense. (AL)

New X-Men #118
Marvel
By Grant Morrison and Ethan Van Sciver

Presumably if you're reading this, you're a comic reader. If you read *this* comic, don't try telling me you haven't fantasized about the situation on page one. "So... anybody else want to sneer at my comic book collection?" indeed.

This issue forms part one of *Germ Free Generation*, in which the X-Men, minus their mentor, must face increasing unpleasantness from anti-mutant mobs, confusion over why the Beast's been so badly beaten, and outright aggression from the U-Men organisation introduced in this year's New X-Men Annual.

It's rare to see intolerance so vividly depicted - which is a good thing - but the end result is that this comic leaves a bad aftertaste. You'll feel good about having read it; but you might not want to read it again.
The Verdict: An uncomfortable subject handled in a disquieting way to leave readers squirming. (MS)

Nightwing #63
DC
By Chuck Dixon and Trevor McCarthy

Just when you think it's best to skip those cross-company events that get in the way of the regular plot now and again, an issue like this comes along. Off-panel, between last issue and this one, Nightwing and his mentor have had an altercation. Facing off against the Joker, a man who murdered Dick's successor as Robin, crippled his girlfriend and has caused untold other mayhem, it appears our cute-butted hero rather lost it slightly and had to be prevented from strangling him to death by a none too impressed Batman.

This issue deals with a guilt-ridden Dick brooding alone in his apartment, ignoring his phone calls and being rude to friends who drop round offering a shoulder to cry on, while leaving the current Robin and Blue Beetle to deal with his regular evening round up of Blüdhaven's baddest. Luckily, the Flash knows just the right thing to say - there's nothing like accusing Dick of being "just like Bruce" to get him off his arse and back onto the rooftops in a hissy fit of denial.
The Verdict: Another chapter of

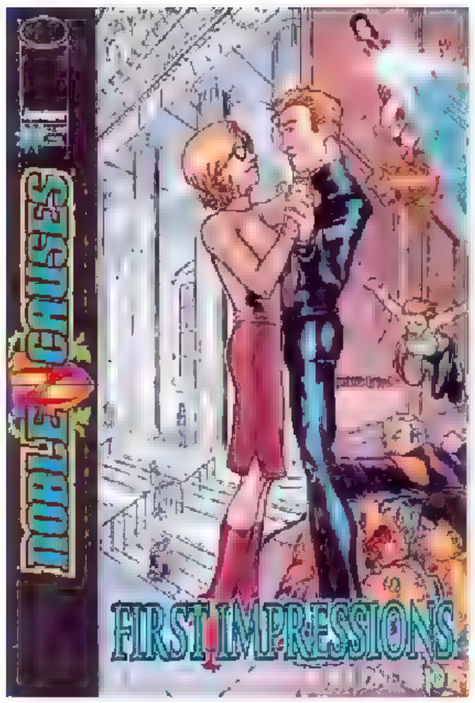
Click on Globe returns to contents

easy reading soap opera fun – and Dick Grayson in tight black leather. Some books just can't go wrong. (JC)

Noble Causes - First impressions #1
Image
By Jay Faerber, Billy Patton and Patrick Gleason

If this introductory one-shot is anything to go by, Image might just have a sleeper hit on its hands. Noble Causes is the tale of the world's first superhero family, with tips of the hat to various patriarchal and matriarchal figureheads from comics past and present. Featuring two stories, which are chronologically out of order, this is the House of Windsor meets the Fantastic Four, with a hint of *Dynasty* thrown in for good measure, and it certainly makes a refreshing change from the current crop of angst-ridden superhero teams.

The story focuses on Race Noble (Flash) and his return to the family with his bride-to-be, a humble bookstore owner rather than a super-powered heroine. While the women in Race's family ponder what the girl is after, the father, a Reed Richards with balls type character, is really only concerned with how good she is in the sack!



There are a number of interesting subplots thrown in to curry the mix, but the thing that really works for me with this comic is the fact that whoever reads it can empathise with what's going on - it is a concept and execution straight out of modern day melodramas. The artwork isn't the best I've ever seen, but it doesn't detract from my favourable first impression.

The Verdict: A noble but ultimately failed cause? Let's hope not. (DRB)

Peter Parker: Spider-Man 2001
Marvel
Fiona Avery & Juan Roman Cano

Fans of J. Michael Straczynski's current run on Amazing Spider-Man may believe they have reason to get excited about this annual. The attractive Michael Golden cover depicts Spidey in a temple reminiscent of the one in Ezekiel's origin; the story itself is written by Fiona Avery, who is, by all accounts, Straczynski's protégée; and for those sufficiently impressed by hyperbole, this comic was solicited in Diamond's *Previews* with the blurb, "Could this somehow be tied to Ezekiel's revelations in Amazing Spider-Man?"

Well...no. Not a bit of it, actually. Cobblers, porkies and what the forgiving might describe as an economy with the truth. There is nothing in this story that impacts upon Straczynski's in the slightest. If you would buy this for that reason, you may safely replace it upon the shelf. If you've already bought this then you have my apologies and, more importantly, my sympathies.

For those who would like to know

about this issue free of my, perhaps naïve, preconceptions, could I tell you of Avery's mastery of pace and invention, and use of snappy dialogue and witty banter in a ground-breaking tale of adventure and human insight?

Well... no. Not too much of that, either, I'm afraid. Pedestrian and forgettable about sums it up. If I wasn't so pissed off about being misled into buying this I'd quite probably have forgotten about it by now. Her previous miniseries, for Top Cow - No Honor - went on for four issues and was barely as memorable. If I sound unimpressed, then that's because I am.

The art by Cano is actually very attractive, giving the script a pace and verve it probably didn't have and certainly doesn't deserve. His pencils are a bit Sam Kieth and a bit Richard Corben, and his inking is very solid and clean. He's a bit of a find, all things considered. But Avery is so utterly unremarkable as a writer that Straczynski should be ashamed at the association. A 'protégée' is one thing; riding on someone else's coat tails is another thing entirely.

The Verdict: In terms of promise, publicity and execution, this is dire and little more than a swindle. As a great man once said: "Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?" (AC)

Promethea #17
ABC
By Alan Moore, JH Williams III and Mick Gray

Sigh. Promethea is an aggravating read at the minute because here you have an excellent art team (including some gorgeous colouring), illustrating a script by one of the most intelligent writers in comics... and its as dull as hell! Indeed, the series has been so since it's seemingly never-ending trip through Moore's belief system (here referred to as "The Immateria") began. There's a place for educational material in comics but here any attempt at relating a plot or a story is thrown out in favour of a discourse on metaphysics issue after issue and, quite frankly, it makes for very hard and unrewarding reading.

The Verdict: Unbelievable talent wasted on a series that has lost any thrust in favour of theoretical sermons. (NL)

The Punisher #6
Marvel Knights
By Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon

There was a time - just before he started on the long and winding road to self-parody that began with Preacher - when Garth Ennis could twist your heart with words, when he could show you sickness and violence and make you hate it, and suffer through it and, ultimately, understand it.

Somehow the jokes took over; the wonderfully underhand and ill sense of humour that would make you laugh as you looked at something in a new light warped into snide and unfeeling jibes at the defenceless and the weak. The violence became cartoonish and bereft of any meaning, as the perpetrators of it became simple and one-dimensional.

If you're out there reading this and nodding, get yourself out to a comic shop and buy Punisher # 9 before all those who praise Garth Ennis but haven't read anything of his before Preacher snap them all up. Get into fights over the last copy, if you must. Break some teeth. You deserve it.

This is the guy who wrote True Faith and the Sorrows books as well as the single best run on Hellblazer. It may just be for this one issue, we may never see him again, but here he is. Garth Ennis Classic.

It's been a damn long time, boy. Welcome back.

The Verdict: All of the strengths of the Ennis/Dillon partnership with none of the weaknesses combine to form their best work since Heartland and simply the best Punisher tale ever. (AC)

Randy O'Donnell is The M@n #3
Image
By Tom DeFalco, Ron Lim and Robert Jones

An apparently standalone issue of the teenage superhero title. The whole package exudes a fun feel, from the deliciously over the top, retro mood of the cover and opening splash page, to the kinetic, colourful artwork, and fast-paced plot. Whereas other attempts at this kind of comic seem to emphasise the retro aspect over the light-hearted fun aspect that characterised so many older comics, this does the latter, and is all the better for doing so.

As such, it seems ideal for the younger reader. However, there is a great deal that the older, veteran comics reader can enjoy here. There are a number of jokes and references that only an experienced comics reader may get, such as a

Click on Globe returns to contents

very nicely done ending that parallels the "great responsibility" denouement of the first Spider-Man story. Interestingly, the apparent clichés that this title is built on, such as the core concept of a bullied outsider having a heroic alter ego, do not detract from enjoying it. Somehow, the creators have managed to present very familiar elements without them seeming hackneyed, which is something of an achievement.

The art is colourful and full of movement, and complements the light-hearted story very well. Surprisingly, and pleasingly, the art team have decided not to opt for a retro art style, a good move as such a style may have alienated younger readers. A welcome addition to the book is the "How To Write Comics" section at the rear, although it may distance the young audience the comic seems to be aimed at. However, it is an interesting read, and would be useful for the novice wannabe comics scribe.

The Verdict: Hardly essential, but lightweight fun, with an undeniable and considerable charm. (KG)

Shidima #0
Image
By Adrian Tsang and Lou Kang

Apparently, this is some kind of preview issue, as it's very short and seems to be setting up a future storyline. Brief as it is, the main characters are introduced successfully, as is something of the world they inhabit.

The script has a few clumsy moments, with some very odd dialogue, but on the whole is quite effective. The art is dark, like that of this comic's parent title Warlands, but it is less murky, and since the story occurs at night, it may brighten in future issues. That said, this has very attractive art indeed, with a good sense of movement, although the storytelling is a little clumsy and it sometimes difficult to tell which panel is next.

The Verdict: Little more than a trailer, but succeeds in creating interest for the main series. (KG)

Spawn #111-112
Image
By Todd McFarlane, Brian Holguin and Angel Medina

It turns out the vampires of The Kingdom can see sin written on human beings' foreheads - and on the night of Cleansing, they plan to sweep down upon New York and kill anyone bearing the mark.

Spawn hatches a plot with his tame demons Ab and Zab, along with disembodied head Wolfram, to sort them out - and, yes, it is shamelessly messianic.

Those of you who know their Christian mythology may recall the bit in the Bible where Christ, after being crucified, goes down to Hell to redeem the sins of the world (or some such; it's been a while since this lapsed old heretic read the thing).

Here, Spawn sucks the sins of the city into himself, leaving The Kingdom with just one target - him. Needless to say, they pile on. Meanwhile, Ab and Zab appear to be doing a bit of good, rescuing Max Jr. and beginning to create a door into Hell.

Any idiot can see where this is going. That doesn't stop this being, so far, one of the best storylines ever to run in Spawn.

The Verdict: Still building up to the climax - but at least there's not long to wait now. It'll all be over in Spawn #113. (MS)

Startling Stories: Banner #4
Marvel Comics
By Brian Azzarello and Richard Corben

This has been either very brave or very stupid storytelling and, given the patience of comics fans, I'm tending to favour the latter. Issue four - the final issue - and finally Azzarello gives us the story we were promised. It's a shame that most of the readers will have wandered off by now, though.

General Ross and Doc Samson have finally captured the Hulk and are keeping him subdued as Banner by sealing him in an airtight tank filled with laughing gas. It's such a wonderfully elegant solution that I'm surprised Peter David didn't use it. However, Ross and Samson differ on the final solution to their Hulk problem.

The finale to this miniseries is almost worth the wait, featuring one of the best final pages to grace a Marvel comic in a long while. It's a shame that the whole thing has been needlessly padded out beyond its length; at two issues this would have been something worth reading, but the middle two issues particularly have been a lamentable waste of time and resources.

The Verdict: A badly paced and over-inflated miniseries culminates in a very effective and chilling finale. A bad case of "too little, too late", and in comics that's just commercial suicide. (AC)

Strangers In Paradise #44
Abstract Studio
By Terry Moore

Boy, was I ever fished in and stitched up like a kipper! Everything between bathroom scenes is just Francine's imagination! And that means the whole of SIP #43! Or, as Moore himself puts it: "What on Earth are you guys thinking?! Do you really

think I'd throw away eight years of story just like that? Come on, give me some credit! Sheesh!"

So, everything's back to normal. Francine's at a crossroads in her life, and has to choose between possible futures - with her best friend, or with her boyfriend. And we, the readers, don't know *where* she's going next.

The title of this issue is *Brave New World*. It's also Business As Usual.

The Verdict: Compulsive - if confusing - fodder for fans of angst-filled life stories. (MS)

Tangled Web #7
Marvel
By Bruce Jones & Lee Weeks

This - the first part of *Gentlemen's Agreement* - has marked similarities to the current storyline over in Peter Parker: Spider-Man, but where that is handled with a distinctly humorous touch, this is a far more realistic and sombre affair.

Charlie, a cab driver with an ex-wife needing alimony and child support, has a brain tumour that will leave him blind within a month and dead within a year, unless he can find the funds for a life-saving operation. What Charlie needs is money and plenty of it. The one thing in his favour is that Charlie has something people would pay very good money for - he knows that Peter Parker is Spider-Man.

Veteran writer Bruce Jones hits all the right notes here, portraying Charlie as a man in dire need, but constrained by his moral and religious character. The agreement he has made to keep Spider-Man's secret informs the whole issue, immersing the reader in the dilemma without resorting to black and white moralising. Charlie is tangled in the web of Spider-Man and also within his own web, where each move he makes results in another entanglement.

Lee Weeks has a beautifully old-fashioned look to his art, with a Steve Rude style of pencilling, though Weeks inks in a rougher fashion. Jones leaves a lot of the panels unscripted, relying on the quality of the art; though there are still a couple of panels that are needlessly dialogued, so strong is Weeks' ability to convey emotion.

The Verdict: Tangled Web, so obviously the moody younger brother of the Spider-Man line, shows more signs of maturing into something quite wonderful. (AC)

Thor: Godstorm #2
Marvel
By Kurt Busiek and Steve Rude

Incredible as it may seem, some readers can't see the point in this exercise. "It's just a chance for Steve Rude to go retro", they say. "There's nothing new in it at all."

Silly, silly people.

Yes, the plots are very simple. Here, Loki plays the cunning deceiver, wrapping Thor in a double-bind - defeat the mortal who has adopted the power of the Godstorm on Earth, yet still get

Click on Globe returns to contents

back to Asgard in time for a battle with Geirrodur and his troll army - in order to make Odin disown Thor and to win the throne of Asgard for himself. Thor outsmarts him, of course.

It's a fable, if you like; a short story with a moral, that teaches people how they should behave. Evil is always defeated, the deceiver is sent packing with something nasty chasing him, while the wise and resourceful reap the rewards.

The artistic side of the storytelling style also stands up to investigation - if only by showing how watered down our comics have become. The images are simple yet powerful. Each panel progresses the story - in the way the characters hold themselves, in the way they move (or at least in the illusion of movement provided by speed lines and so forth - a skill that seems to be dying out, or which many modern artists seem to lack), and in their facial expressions.

"Ah, but comics are more sophisticated these days," the critics might say. Alas, yes. More sophisticated, less powerful. Less interesting too, in many cases.

The Verdict: It's a trip back to basics. And we find that this kind of basic storytelling still works just fine. (MS)

Tomb Raider #18
Top Cow/Image
By Dan Jurgens, Gerardo Sandoval and Marlo Alquiza

Lara Croft leads a journalist into an ancient ruin in an attempt to dispel some of the negative connotations of being a tomb raider, but things shift when her companion turns against her in a fit of greed. Jurgens's script is awful, with lapses of logic in the plotting, poor dialogue and some sequences that were either poorly conceived or totally ruined by the artist, who makes the sudden ending difficult to comprehend. Newcomer Sandoval hasn't turned in an abysmal art job, but it's not far from average and a lot less than such a high profile licensed project demands.

The Verdict: Lightweight and readable in five minutes, it's still five minutes and some cash you're never going to get back or benefit from losing. (NL)

Trout #1
Oni Press
By Troy Nixey

The travelling Erasermus Puppet Show visits the sleepy hamlet of Lower Upton, shocking the townsfolk with its oddly realistic puppets and later secretly calling the children out at night to devour their souls, except for Trout, who eludes their calling for a little while.

This is a veritable melting pot of influences, all deftly mixed together into something that, if not exactly new, is nevertheless enjoyable and accomplished. If you like the films of Tim Burton, the cartoons of Basil Wolverton and Edward Gorey, the animation of Jan Svankmajer or the writings of H.P. Lovecraft, then there is plenty here to interest you.

Nixey's plot is an old style fairy tale without any sort of needless padding; it all whips along nicely, neither too overblown nor too slight. His art is macabre and delightful with plenty of detail and solidity brought about by an accomplished mastery of the brush.

If, as it deserves, this is successful, perhaps Oni could collect the Dark Horse Presents material into one volume?

The Verdict: Deliciously macabre and charming, another idiosyncratic hit from Oni. (AC)

2000AD #1263-1266: Judge Dredd - *On The Chief Judge's Service Rebellion*

At the end of the four-part Judge Dredd story *Chief Judge's Man* (#1244-7) earlier this year, we learned that Judge DeKlerk, leading the investigation into the "Justice Killer" vigilante, was in fact impersonating Chief Judge Hershey to manipulate ex-space corps officer Armon Gill into assassinating Mega-City One's troublesome dissenters. In this sequel we start piecing together the jigsaw, learning more about DeKlerk's methods and motivation. And the story's neat conclusion also sets us up nicely for further conflict between DeKlerk, Gill and Dredd.

After a summer offensive which offered us the frankly disappointing Ennis-scripted *Helter Skelter*, we are back amongst friends as uberscribe John Wagner takes us once again into Justice Department's heart of darkness. Dredd stories are at their best when they are like this. Shadowy plots and conspiracies satirizing the endearing worlds of our own political, military and legal systems, a bite-yer-balls-off villain and Dredd himself kept well in the background.

Look, let's not pretend otherwise. Dredd's a pretty one-dimensional character in himself - a fascist robot with a big motorbike. But his adventures have kept us well and truly entertained since 1977 because Wagner knows the character's limitations, so populates his world with an astonishing range of freaks and weirdoes, heroes and villains, babes and monsters, whatever. And it's the appeal of these characters to readers that makes the most memorable Dredd stories what they are. Here we cannot fail to be wholly engaged by the cadaverous DeKlerk and the monstrous Gill. Dredd's just the guy running around after them.

And how. Back in the 80s, in stories like *The Executioner*, Wagner pioneered an occasional trend for narrating stories from the point of view of Dredd's adversaries. At varying points in *On The Chief Judge's Service* the captions concentrate on all three of the main characters'

IN THE BRIEF MOMENTS BEFORE THE FIRST EXPLOSION THERE HAD BEEN A GLIMMER OF RECOGNITION.
NOW THE TENACITY OF THE ATTACK HARDENS DREDD'S SUSPICION.
FACE HAS CHANGED BUT THE STYLE'S THE SAME! IT'S HIM -- THE JUSTICE KILLER!
AND I WANT HIM ALIVE!

thoughts and feelings, but never in a clumsy fan-fic way. The switching of perspectives here is done boldly and seamlessly. It tantalises and illuminates, drives the story on and leaves you yearning for more. Caption-heavy comics can be verbose and undynamic. But not when they're Dredd stories written like this.

If you're not reading 2000AD at the moment make sure you are when the Justice Killer strikes back.

The Verdict: With Colin McNeil's flawless painted artwork, this makes for a beautiful read. (AL)

Ultimate Marvel Team-Up #9
Marvel
By Brian Michael Bendis and Jim Mahfood

Realism takes a back seat this issue, as Bendis writes an anarchic comedy tale that would not be out of place in The Beano. The premise of this wacky story is that Peter Parker is sent by his school to a work experience placement with the Fantastic Four. This is a pleasing twist on the way that the Marvel Universe versions of Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four first met.

The humour is self-referential and irreverent with digs at not only the Marvel Universe, but also at a number of Marvel staff members. This may be too much for the continuity-obsessed reader, but the jokes are actually quite good, so it would be churlish to criticise the comic for this. Bendis shows a knack for comedy, and Mahfood's art brilliantly augments the writing by adding in all kinds of amusing little details, like tiny copyright symbols accompanying each instance of the Fantastic Four logo. His loose linework is ideal for the madcap tone of the writing, and his Spider-Man and Thing are particularly good.

This is the kind of fun book the Big

Click on Globe returns to contents

Two publishers should put out more often. Plus, the comic features H.E.R.B.I.E., which should be reason alone to purchase it!
The Verdict: Not to be taken at all seriously, but very well put together nonetheless. A very worthwhile purchase indeed. (KG)

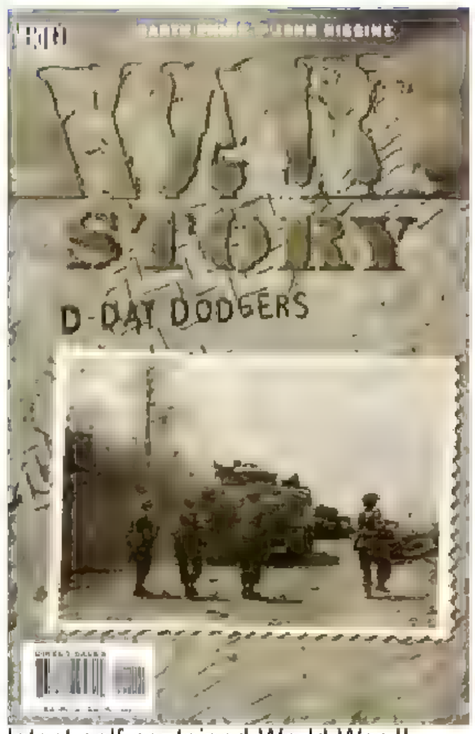
Warlands: The Age of Ice #3
Image
By Pat Lee and Adrian Tsang
This comic opens with a very effective first page, portraying suitably grotesque monsters as the narrative hints at the main character's fate.

The art is very striking and attractive, although the palette is far too dark for the setting, a problem not helped by the decision to use dark speech bubbles! It all seems rather detached from the story, as if this is written around the pictures rather than the other way around. This seems to be something of a general problem with most of Image's manga-influenced output, so perhaps it constitutes a house style.

That said, this comic is considerably less reliant on huge panels than others, and so manages to tell a story of satisfactory length. The writing is strong, with the characters and situations effectively presented, and the plot is an intriguing one, with an effective cliffhanger ending. The dialogue, too, is quite powerful, with few of the clichés expected from the fantasy genre.
The Verdict: Despite some dubious artistic decisions, this is quite a strong comic and is certainly worth a look. (KG)

War Story: D-Day Dodgers
DC
By Garth Ennis and John Higgins
"If we do it well we're butchers. If we mess it up we're cowards."

The inspiration for Garth Ennis's



latest self-contained World War II story is a wartime speech made by Lady Astor accusing allied troops stationed in Italy of being D-Day dodgers. Or as one of the Ulster Regiment soldiers puts it in the story, of "sittin' out the war where it's nice and quiet while the real fightin' gets done in France".

It's something the Preacher writer clearly feels strongly about. For behind the familiar Ennis motifs - do I really need to tell you there's a disdain for religion, lots of Irish characters and even some alcohol consumed? – D-Day Dodgers endeavours to set the record straight and focuses on the humanity of the fighting men as they prepare to face battle and inevitable death. In a war comic which is about as far away from Warlord, Victor or Battle as it is from Buster, Whoopee or Shiver and Shake, those hoping for a re-tread of Union-Jack Jackson or D-Day Dawson are going to be disappointed. Similarly, readers anticipating a reaction to those gung-ho World War II comics of the 70s and 80s should regard this story in the way it is surely meant to be regarded - as a complement to what fuelled the fertile imagination of Ennis the schoolboy, the next chapter in our collective fascination with a period of history about which stories will forever be told.

But perhaps the most potent theme of the comic is the story's entire *raison d'etre* - as relevant in today's media-driven society as Ennis suggests it was in the 1940s - the idea that war is all about headlines, that decisions are made by celebrity-conscious leaders with no regard for the countless lives lost on their whim. As the story's two central characters sit in a devastated church, men worlds apart in peacetime but thrown together by the conceit that is war, Ennis treats us to the observation that "there will be more wars. And this will happen again". Just look in the headlines.
The Verdict: War presented without any glamour, and with a bare minimum of actual fighting - but with integrity and soul. (AL)

Witchblade/Lady Death
Top Cow/Image/Chaos!
David Wohl and Francis Manapul
David Wohl should know better and Francis Manapul is probably over the moon that he has actually drawn a real comicbook (it should be his last).

This meeting of busty heroines is really quite dreadful. It has no atmosphere, no sense of the foreboding you'd expect from two dark characters and reminds me of the trash Marvel was producing in the mid-90s – you remember the "It has an X-Man in it, get a horse to draw it and it'll still sell shitloads" philosophy? Well, this proves that Marvel might change, but its imitators really haven't got a clue.
The Verdict: Pap. Unadulterated rubbish. People read this? Kill them, put them out of their misery! (DRB)

VERDICT COLLECTED EDITION

American Century: Scars & Stripes
Vertigo
By Howard Chaykin, David Tischman, Mark Laming and John Stokes.

No, you don't want to read superheroes, they're nothing but adolescent male power fantasies... when are you going to grow up and read *post*-adolescent male power fantasies? Like American Century...

Welcome to the world of Howard Chaykin, a world where men are men (and really all rather unpleasant men at that) and women are generally either harpies or harlots (but always ready to drop their clothes for those same unpleasant men). It's 1950 and ex-WWII pilot Harry Block is sick of living the dull, suburban American nightmare, so he stages his own death and escapes to Central America where he becomes embroiled in a complex plot of espionage and international back-stabbing. Chaykin and Tischman expertly sketch both period and politics, creating a fairly misanthropic world, totally devoid of heroes, which may alienate some readers. Harry's amorality starts out refreshing, yet quickly becomes depressing - we keep waiting for a glimmer of goodness, a spark of compassion... but as the opening storyline draws to a close, his callous reaction to a brutal murder shows little positive development. We can only hope that his character will grow more as the series progresses, otherwise even the hardest readers will quickly grow tired of his cynicism.

American Century does have its moments, particularly the opening chapter's portrayal of middle class malaise, reminiscent of *The Ice Storm*. The art is stylish and detailed, Steranko-meets-Jiminez, though the inking does leave the figures a little stiff in places. The acerbic humour is mostly successful, though occasionally spoilt by gags that must surely have been old even in 1950 (Harry's wife wondering, following his staged plane crash, what was the last thing to go through his mind... "the propeller or the landing gear?").
The Verdict: An intriguing thriller impaired by its unsympathetic hero and old fashioned, overly macho tone. (RH)

Danger Girl Sketchbook
Cliffhanger
By J. Scott Campbell
This is a very difficult title to review. Firstly, it's incredibly late! After a wait this long, Danger Girl fans (if there are any left) would be justified in

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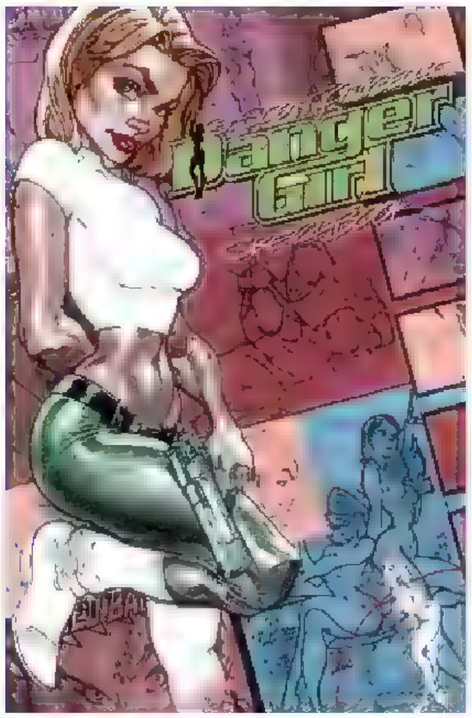


expecting the Earth - and of course, they're not going to get it.

Secondly, this is not a comic; it's just a collection of pretty pictures from Campbell's sketchbook, together with promo pieces for Danger Girl-related projects including a computer game and a pinball machine. So the test of whether you're getting value for money here depends entirely on whether you like the pictures.

Fortunately for Mr Campbell, this reviewer does. It's a gorgeous package, and for followers of the series it has to be fun to see how the characters' individual looks progressed before the first strip pages were drawn. The Disney-esque pages are great, too.

The Sketchbook also makes it clear (tacitly) why the Danger Girl comic was always so late: Campbell took on just too much darned work! What with storyboarding the video game, covers for other magazines, and that pinball machine, it's hard to believe he had any time to draw the regular comic at all.

It's interesting to see the main sketch on the cover looks like it could have been drawn by Ian Gibson. I wonder if JSC has ever seen Gibson's work?
The Verdict: Beautiful to look at - but why did it take so long to get to us? (MS)

Fallout
G.T. Labs
By Jim Ottaviani and various artists

The writer of science fact anthologies Two Fisted Science and Dignifying Science continues his excellent use of the comics medium for education and entertainment. His story of the development of the A Bomb through the eyes of those involved (mainly Leo Szilard and J. Robert Oppenheimer) is fictionalised, but annotated so you can be surprised by which bits are true. He uses the anthology format to depict episodes throughout the history of the Manhattan Project, and this works well throughout, with only minor hiccoughs following a couple of characters as the art style changes.

The artists on the project are credited for their chapters at the end of the book. The prologue, interludes and epilogue are unmistakably the work of Bernie Mireault. Janine Johnston does the early years, the slightly more offbeat Chris Kemple is used effectively during Szilard's visions of the world of the future, Steve Lieber, Vince Locke, Eddy Newell and Jeff Parker also contribute.

The artists all complement the writing well, even during the "difficult" technical sections, such as pages 76-79 as an atomic pile is built (art by Locke). Mostly this is done by showing the scientists and their military "colleagues" in conversation, but there are notable exceptions. There is an effective juxtaposition of a technical lecture by one of the scientists with images of the preliminary tests, with the military types drawing schematics in the sand of the test site (illustrated by Parker). On the whole, the different artists keep fairly close to one another in style so there's a sharp portrayal of tensions between the scientists and the military with Oppenheimer a willing buffer in between. The subsequent hearings of the Personnel Security Board are shown in comic panels, while Oppenheimer's response to the "derogatory comments" against him is shown in text interspersed throughout the panels.

The story progresses from the vision of Szilard to his misgivings; through Oppenheimer's arbitration between the growing unrest among the scientists and the growing enthusiasm of the military; and finally to Oppenheimer's own doubts and his undoing by people who sought to discredit him.

It is a shame that there are not more people with the vision of Ottaviani, which brings comics into the domain of very compelling text books (and we all know how compelling most text books are). Jay Hosler's Clan Apis, Eric Shanower's Age Of Bronze and the all but vanished Big Books from DC's Paradox imprint are the other examples that spring to mind.
Verdict: Fallout is an excellent use of graphic storytelling to place historic events in a narrative setting. Find out more at www.gt-labs.com. *(AB)*

Spider-Man: The Ultimate Guide
Marvel/Dorling Kindersley
Written by Tom DeFalco

Released in time for next year's inevitable Spider-mania, DeFalco's Spidey biography offers a comprehensive history, broken down into easily digestible chunks for the short of attention span. The opening section covers Spidey's origin, powers, family and friends, pulling 40 years of continuity into comprehensive dossiers that offer both an introduction for new readers and a refresher course for old-timers - there are enough obscure facts here to satisfy even the most obsessive Spidey-historians!

The rest of the book is divided by decade, introducing major characters and plotlines from the Lee-Ditko heyday through to later peaks such as the deaths of George and Gwen Stacy, *Kraven's Last Hunt* and Peter's marriage to Mary Jane.

Inevitably, the 90s come out looking pretty bad, relying too heavily on gimmicky story ideas (the return of Peter's parents and the infamous *Clone Saga*, which even DeFalco struggles to make sense of) and derivative characters (the most notable new villain is Carnage - a second rate Venom!). For the most part, the book toes the Marvel line and avoids critical evaluation, though DeFalco can't resist comment on Byrne's relaunch being "greeted with less than thunderous applause".

There are bound to be omissions and inconsistencies - no entries for the Tarantula, the Beetle or the Tinkerer, yet full pages devoted to Will O' The Wisp, Solo and the Tri-Sentinel? - but this is still a hugely satisfying dash through 40 years of webslinging with high production values and lavish illustrations (including spot art, classic covers and panel grabs) - though an artists' index is a clear oversight.
The Verdict: A wonderful Christmas present for the Spider-fan in your life... almost worth buying a coffee table to put it on! (RH)

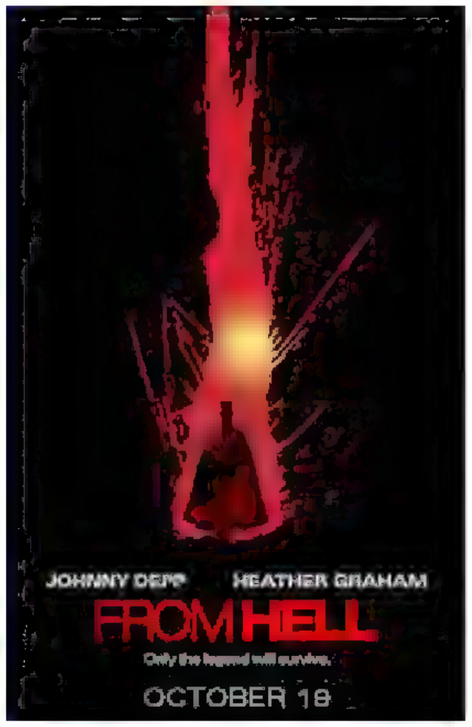
Zero Girl
Homage
By Sam Kieth

The stirring and tender story of a relationship between a nerdy 15 year old and her school guidance counsellor, a mixed up 20-something male. Is it infatuation, or something more - and what will they do about it? Yeah, there's a load of other stuff about murder, decapitation, evil squares battling good circles, a German philosopher reincarnated as a sow bug and a premonition involving a drinks coaster - but that's just window dressing. It's how Sam Kieth got away with selling such an intensely personal (and, as his new afterword reveals, partly autobiographical) story to an imprint otherwise devoted to super-heroes.

The relationship between Amy and Tim showcases honest and funny writing, capturing the struggle of two characters torn between doing what's right and doing what feels right. The weirdness may all be a metaphor for adolescence, or it may be something less straightforward and more comic-booky, but it merges surprisingly well with the essentially human story at the heart of Zero Girl. Kieth's art is delicious, whether he's tackling the attack of a killer lawn mower or the awkwardness of a 15 year old - one moment a beautiful young woman, the next a clumsy little girl.
The Verdict: One of the best mini-series of the year from a unique voice in comics, this reads even better collected. (RH)

Click on Globe returns to contents

FILM REVIEW: FROM HELL



"What I'm hoping for is a situation like, say, the one with Philip K. Dick's short story, Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep?. *It was a very, very good story, and the film* Blade Runner *was a very good film which didn't necessarily have a great deal of connection with Dick's story. But both were successful entities in their own right."* - Alan Moore on his aspirations for the film adaptation of From Hell

UNDOUBTEDLY pitched to film studio Fox as the Victorian stalking serial killer version of *Se7en*, *From Hell* manages to have some visually resplendent moments with all of its gothic darkness and a talented, interesting cast, but it never really finds the real meat of its story.

Let's get the biases out of the way up front: I didn't read the From Hell graphic novel before I saw this movie, on purpose. It's difficult to gauge the merits of a movie if you've already seen it in your head by reading a novel (or a graphic novel, as it were). So my copy of the From Hell book sits on the shelf, untouched since the 2001 San Diego Comicon where I bought it from Eddie Campbell - and my review won't be clouded by the woulda-coulda-shoulda comments of an unhappy book reader upset by what he sees on screen.

The premise here is familiar enough - Jack the Ripper is killing prostitutes. Mary Kelly (Heather Graham) is next. Inspector Abberline (Johnny Depp) must stop the killer before he kills again. Trouble is, Abberline gets visions. Visions of the killer, tipping him off to what might happen next, or perhaps a new clue. It's a curious narrative device that the directors and the writers employ, because it diminishes the heroism of Abberline. He is no Sherlock Holmes - for that, see John Neville in *A Study in Terror*, or Christopher Plummer in *Murder by Decree* - because he cheats. He's not piecing together subtle clues and working a mystery into a logical conclusion before our very eyes. No, a *deus ex machina* plot device is handing him the solutions so he doesn't have to do the work. Abberline can go smoke his opium, close his eyes, and get to the next plot point.

Depp is certainly fine - people with a finer ear for an English accent have complained about his intonations, but such subtleties are lost on me. Heather Graham is fine as well, turning in a performance that's for the most part value-neutral: not really very good, but never bad. The supporting players are really the strength here. Robbie Coltrane is delightful as ever (catch him now as Hagrid in *Harry Potter*) and Ian Holm (*Alien*, and Bilbo Baggins in the upcoming *Lord of the Rings*) is always a joy to watch. Leslie Sharp and Susan Lynch play the other whores working next to Heather Graham, and do a great enough job.

Allen and Albert Hughes at first would seem to be an interesting choice to direct this movie - the film captains of inner city crime movies like *Menace II Society* and *Dead Presidents*, they'd appear to be out of their element in Victorian England, but in truth it's the dark gritty horror of urban life that they hone in on. Reportedly having shot for $30 million, the two brothers put a lot of production value on the screen. It looks great. Some of the shots are inventive, dark, and atmospheric. It's beautiful stuff.

But as is so often the case with directors who can frame a pretty picture, the story loses track of itself about three quarters of the way in and never regains its momentum. Abberline isn't that involving as a character - as stated before, his breakthroughs on the case seem to arrive out of thin air, and, outside of his opium addiction, his personality isn't developed. He's a character type more than a persona. Heather Graham's Mary Kelly is much the same. Aside from being ridiculously clean and beautiful for a Victorian prostitute, she isn't given much to do aside from worry for her life and moon over Depp. As a result, we never really feel any suspense because we're not interested in these characters. The film plays the gore more than the suspense - oh, boy does it play the gore, you've been warned - and as such, it never finds a way to vault this thriller into the terrain of the thrilling. There's no real pulse-quickening action, with the plot eventually losing its momentum and its characters feeling more like they're rats running through a narrative maze than making dynamic choices and breathing life into the script - written by Terry Hayes (who wrote *Road Warrior*) and Rafael Yglesias (who adapted *Les Misérables*).

The net result is an interesting diversion. Skip the theater, rent this one on DVD, and lower your expectations. The Hughes Brothers craft some arresting visuals and the supporting players turn in some fine performances, but the central storyline feels like it plods too much for a thriller and the characters desperately need something interesting to do. Maybe the next time Hollywood does the Ripper they'll invest more energy in the people and characters he's threatening, and less in the glitzy *Se7en*-like production values.

Ross Richie

Click on Globe returns to contents

CLASSIC TRADEPAPERBACK REVIEW

Green Arrow: The Longbow Hunters

DC Comics By Mike Grell

IT'S 1987. Maggie and Ronnie are in power, *Wall Street* and *Full Metal Jacket* wow cinema audiences, the American stock market crashes, Fred Astaire and Andy Warhol snuff it and Michael Jackson releases *Bad*. Oh yeah, and comics are enjoying a boom in popularity as Alan Moore and Frank Miller tear up the superhero rule book to bring us dark tales of impending apocalypse, psychological malfunction and costumed marvels who'd rather torture criminals than imprison them in a Fortress of Solitude or restrain them with a magic lasso.

This obsession with the seamier side of superhero life takes hold and soon every mainstream character in need of a sales/credibility boost is given a gritty 80s makeover pitched at a more adult audience. The Flash sells his arse to finance a $1,000 a day smack habit, Power Man and Iron Fist join New York's thriving S&M scene and Spider-Man gets a spooky new black costume that tries to kill him (as ridiculous as that may sound).

Amidst the carnage, writer/artist Mike Grell (of Warlord and Sable "fame") is given the onerous task of reviving the flagging fortunes of Green Arrow, who'd last enjoyed something vaguely recognisable as popularity in the early 70s when he'd shared a regular title with his old pal Green Lantern. Happy to surf the reality zeitgeist, Grell relocates Oliver Queen and his missus, Black Canary, to Seattle, re-jigs his costume to make it a bit less Errol Flynn, and turns him into an "urban hunter" (whatever one of those is). In a clear doff of the cap to Miller's Daredevil run, Grell also introduces a mysterious female assassin - Shado - not a million miles removed from DD's very own ninjaette, Elektra.

Unfortunately, in amongst all the re-branding, re-imagining and re-heating, Grell forgets to include anything approaching a sensible or engrossing story. So keen is he to make GA seem relevant and cutting edge that he serves up a tale containing a host of 80s folk devils (drugs, serial killers, gangs of street punks, CIA black ops, arms dealers, vicious pimps) and hopes they will suffice in lieu of clarity, subtlety or interesting storytelling. The result is an oft confusing, poorly structured hotchpotch of random violence, vague conspiracy theory and unpleasant titillation.

In a better writer's hands a Mature Readers version of Green Arrow could have been a winner, but Grell makes the same mistake that so many other comic book scribes have made down the years when faced with the task of producing material pitched at an adult audience - he goes for the cheap thrill. Hence a high number of panels depicting blood soaked arrows skewering flesh, and the unsettling, vaguely pornographic, image of a stripped, beaten and bloody Black Canary trussed up like a Christmas turkey.

There's a real conceit here, too. Grell clearly thought the story he was telling was - cue portentous music - *important* in some way. That's why each of the three original episodes appeared perfect bound *a la* Dark Knight, why its artwork is colours over pencils with no inks (so much more "artistic", don't you think?), and why its script tries so hard to strike a note of social relevance (Canary even mentions Colonel Qaddafi and Yasser Arafat at one point). Scratch away at the style, though, and there's little going on beneath its bright, shiny surface. Grell has no real knowledge to impart, other than to tell us that arms dealers, crooked businessmen, bent CIA agents and drugs runners are bad people. And so are serial killers (apart from the sexy Japanese ones who are on your side). It's a shame, as the first chapter, in which Olly teeters on the precipice of a mid-life crisis, worrying that he's "lost his edge", is a set-up that might have had real potential.

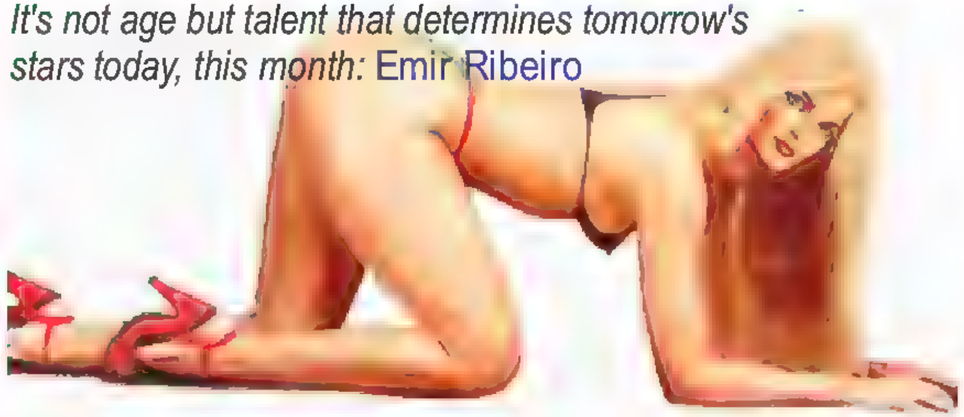
The Verdict: Presumably re-released to cash in on the popularity of Kevin Smith's current GA title, The Longbow Hunters hasn't aged well. Like the decade that spawned it, this is artificial, pretentious and laughably quaint. (AW)

Miffy
Adrian Kermode & Terry Wiley
-SINCE IT'S OUR FIRST BIG NIGHT OUT IN AGES, I SAY WE GET STEAMING DRUNK, GO CLUBBING AND GRAB A CURRY
WHAT Y'HAVIN'?
I'LL HAVE ONE OF THOSE, THANKS!
-YOU'RE JOKING, AREN'T YOU?
NO! I LIKE THEM - THEY'RE REALLY QUITE NICE...
-A PINT OF OLD SPECKLED PECULIAR... ...AND A SMIRNOFF WUSSY FOR THE BIG JESSIE PLEASE
WHADDA FLAMIN' TART...
...CAN I HAVE A STRAW WITH THIS PLEASE?

Click on Globe returns to contents

YOUNG GUNS

It's not age but talent that determines tomorrow's stars today, this month: Emir Ribeiro

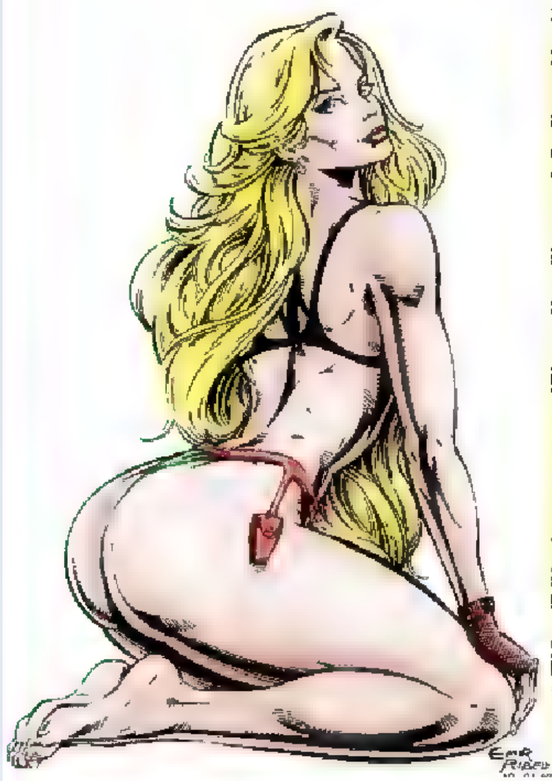


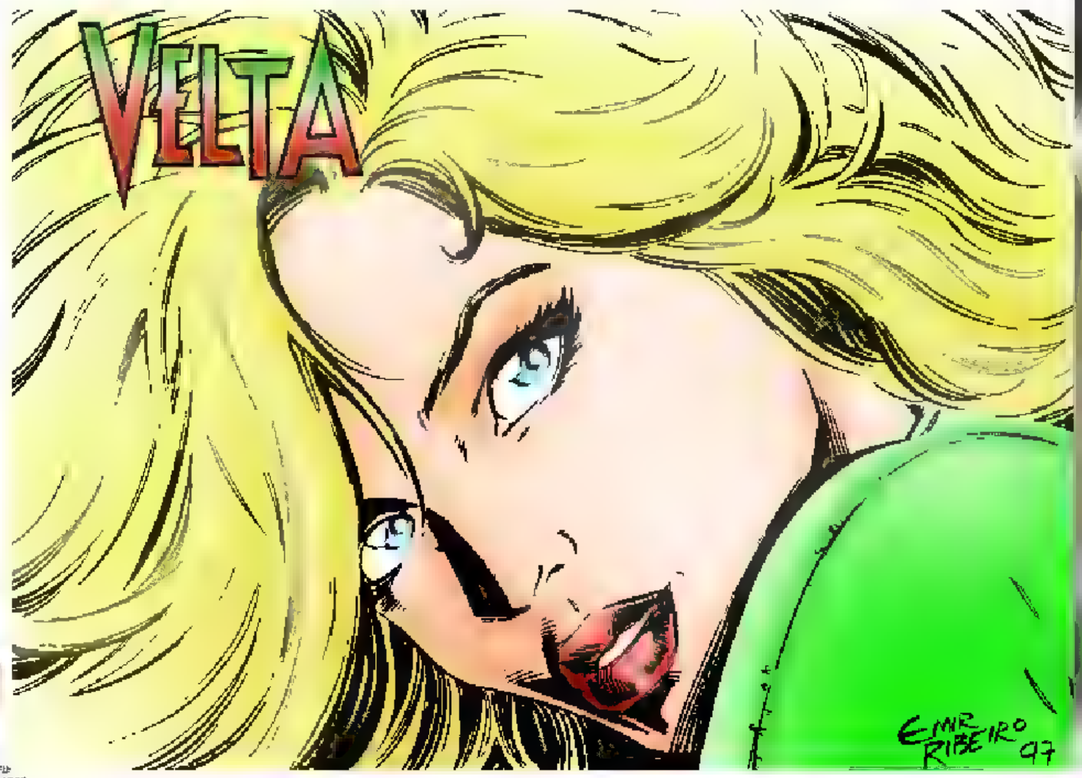
EMIR RIBEIRO has always seemed to be just an inch away from fame and success in the U.S. comics market, where he has worked on such titles and characters as Wonder Woman, Hulk vs. Hercules, the Avengers, Thor, Quantum Leap, Mack Bolan: The Executioner and many others. Since 1993 he has often assisted Mike Deodato in pencilling and inking; but frequently, thanks to the vagaries and whims of his editors, Emir's work has gone uncredited.

Emir Lima Ribeiro is 42 years old and lives in the same city as Mike Deodato: João Pessoa, known as the greenest capital of the Americas. He was married 18 years ago and has two children, 17 and 14 years old. He is a writer, penciller, inker and Photoshop-based painter, and he is a legendary figure in Brazil, having produced his own comics creations for a faithful public for more than two decades.

The first U.S. work bearing Emir's name in the credits was Malibu Comics' The Protectors, on which he inked Tom Derenick's pencils. Soon he was pencilling and inking Quantum Leap, which led to other work for Innovation - and, not long afterwards, inking work on Image's Glory. His first superhero pencilling and inking assignment was Avengelyne/Prophet, for Maximum Press in 1996. More recently, Emir has drawn *Marvel Silver Age Sketchograph* cards, *Women of Star Trek: Voyager* and other card sets, as well as two issues of Purgatori: Darkest Hour, for Chaos Comics.

However, Emir's career didn't begin in 1993 in U.S. but in Brazil during the 1970s! In 1969 he created his first, humorous, character, Smartie, and in 1970 he created the bizarre, villainous Doroti; then, in 1973, came his most famous creation - the sexy blonde giantess VELTA, known in Brazil as "the muse of the Brazilian comics." Many other creations followed Velta: Itabira, the Chief of Tabajaras Indians (co-authored with his father Emilson Ribeiro in 1975); Nova, The Ginoid, and The Man in Black (both in 1976); and the vampire Michélle. Emir made two VHS films with The Man in Black, using amateur actors (including himself), in 1989 and 1993. All these characters created by him were published in comic strips, newspapers and comic books





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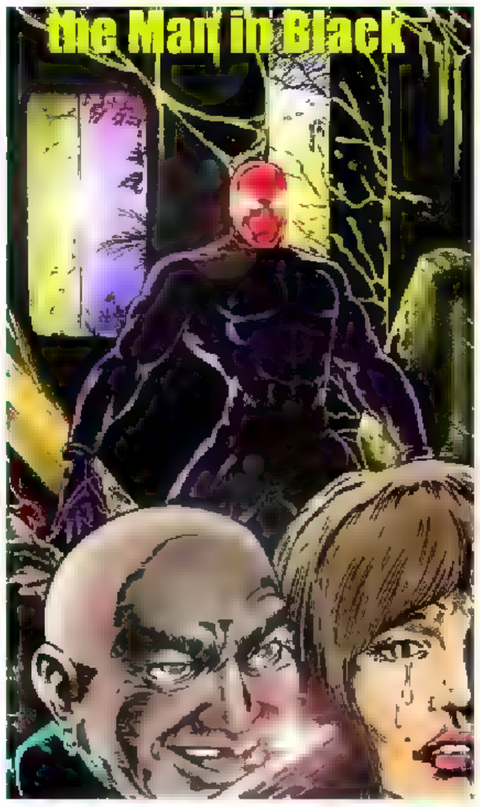


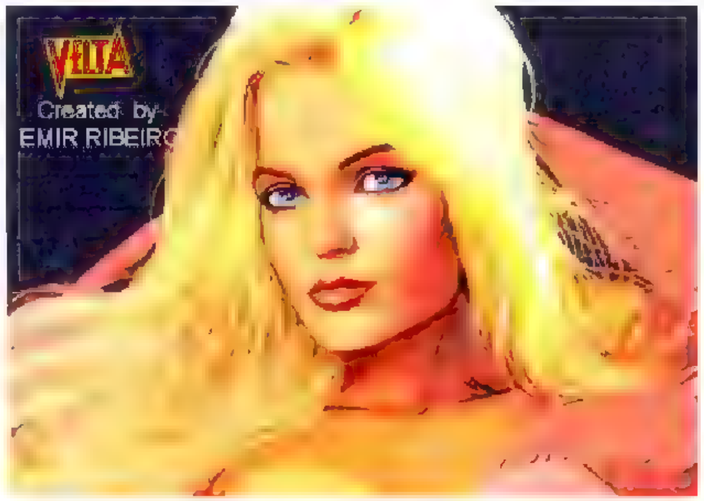
in Brazil, where the artist has been hailed by the press as a "Brazilian Stan Lee."

Describing his most famous creation, Velta, Emir says "I began to love the comics after seeing those old TV cartoons with Hulk, Thor, Namor, Captain America, and Iron Man. They were not very animated, but I adored watching them every day. And one day I thought 'Why is it only muscular men who combat crime and evil? Why has nobody created a pretty and sexy girl who does the same?' So I created Velta – she's the same height as the Hulk, but she isn't green, and she doesn't have those muscular proportions. Her powers are cellular regeneration and the ability to project bio-blasts from all parts of her body." Velta was created especially for Brazil, with a physique which fits what Emir calls "the national preference". He explains, "While North Americans like girls with big breasts, Brazilian men love a woman with wide hips and big, round ass – and Velta is what they want. Besides, she is pretty, intelligent and sexy."

Amongst Emir's other prominent characters, Nova, The Ginoid, is very different from most heroines. The redheaded Nova is a cybernetic organism – the heart and brain of a girl dying from an incurable disease but surviving in a robotic body. She is merciless with criminals, even killing them when she deems it necessary. Then there is The Man in Black, the crimefighting vigilante filmed on VHS; as Emir explains, "He is a mystery, the readers do not know his true identity, nor the colour of his skin, nor the colour of his eyes - because he is always completely covered in black clothes and a red mask with mirror lenses in the eyes."

For all his many original creations, Emir Ribeiro has never published his characters in the North American market. "I think that the U.S. editors should open up a forum where the public can discover foreign characters", he says.

Editors who've worked with Emir know their pages are in good



hands. When work needs to be done, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays don't exist for him. "I like to be very punctual and not to delay delivery of the pages", he explains. "To achieve that I work many hours a day, and every day of the week. I only stop drawing when the work is finished. I always try to do the best that I can, so as not to disappoint the people who trust me.

"I arrange everything so that the editors are happy with my work. I even change my customary style, when that is requested! I have already done drawings in styles similar to Berni Wrightson's and Jack Kirby's, I've drawn science fiction, horror/ terror (oops!), and other genres. Occasionally I also get a chance to write. It is necessary to be versatile and to be always open to change".

Emir always has projects on the burner and waits for chances to develop them. "My mind just doesn't stop turning out ideas. From waking to sleeping I'm having ideas for new stories and projects. My wife is the most patient person in the world. I think if she were anyone else, she would already have abandoned me... whoever has seen the VHS films of The Man in Black knows what I mean! I may be 42 years old, but my brain is still as lively as it was at 15, still busily creating scripts, characters and projects."

He is currently inking Purgatori for Chaos! Comics, over pencils by fellow Brazilian artist Fabiano Neves. BL

Click on Globe returns to contents

DRAWING BOARD

Secrets from the Artist's portfolio: Roger Langridge

NEW Year's Eve, 2000. I stood up, raised my glass and announced to anybody who would listen that my New Year's resolution would be to abstain from buying comics until I had something of my own in print again, with my name on the copyright. Several people shouted "hooray" and fainted. One person tried to punch me.

By April, I was getting desperate. I had the work together – I'd been doing a weekly strip on the internet, **Fred the Clown**, a collection of which I'd been trying to find a publisher for - but nobody was interested. And those **Spirit Archives** kept coming out, taunting me with their wouldn't-you-like-to-know matt covers and come-hither offset printing. Something drastic was called for.

Time to self-publish.

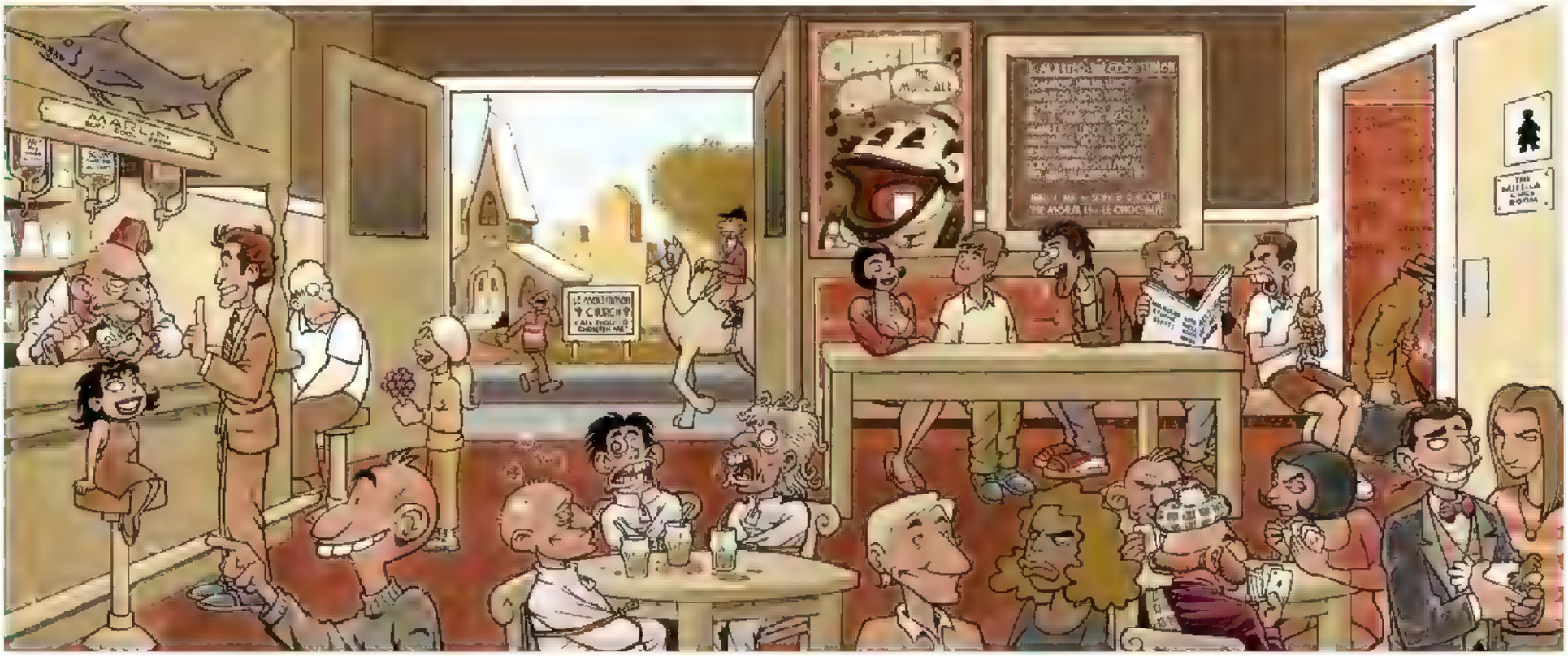
At the time, it was an act of sheer desperation. Now, seven months later, I think it's the smartest thing I ever did. People have been writing to me saying "welcome back" and "I thought you were dead". I take their welcomes in the spirit they were intended, and say thank you very much, and have you got any

plumbing you need doing?

I started drawing comics in New Zealand, which is where I grew up. In around 1988 or so, while I was trying to fill in four long years at University, I took my portfolio up to the student newspaper and asked if they wanted some drawings. Not only did they want them, they were willing to give me $10 per drawing (That's nearly three quid).

Success! My financial situation has been pretty much like that ever since.

I had a couple of "proper jobs", making pizza and doing clerical work slightly below the level a chimp could do, while I saved my pennies to come to London and break into comics. During this time, I was sending my work off to anybody who'd look at it, and in 1989 Fantagraphics offered me and my brother Andrew, with whom I was making minicomics at the time, our own comic - **Art**



d'Ecco. So I already had something published by the time I got on the plane, which made the going a little smoother once I got here.

I showed up in London in 1990 and started grovelling, a technique I still use today. It seemed to work. Steve McManus took pity on me and I was soon working on the **Judge Dredd Megazine**, drawing what I'm told is their least popular strip ever. Apart from a two-year gap when I foolishly returned to New Zealand under the deluded impression that I could work from the Old Country through the mail, I've been here ever since.

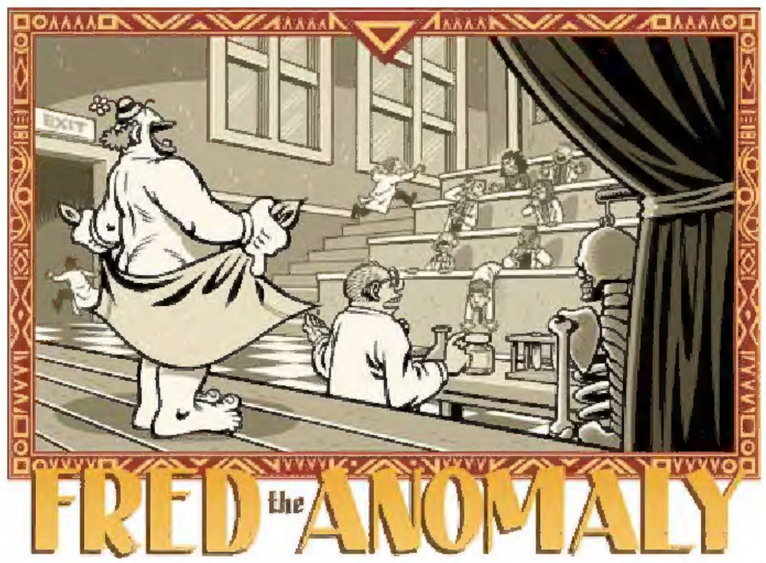
Apart from **Fred the Clown**,

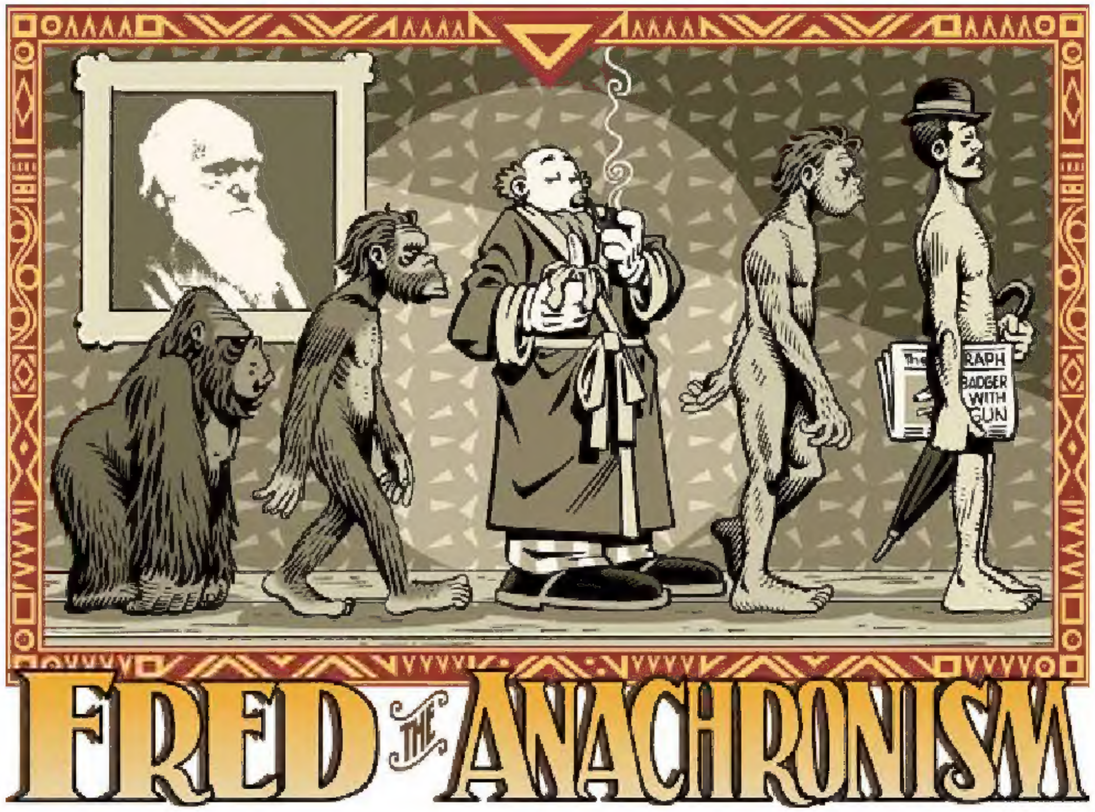
Click on Globe returns to contents

which I'm trying to get out every four months, and the Fred weekly web cartoon, I do a lot of illustration work, mostly of educational textbooks for the likes of Hodder and Heinemann, plus a regular illustration every month in **Doctor Who Magazine**. I've done short stories for a few anthologies (**The Comics Journal Winter Special**, **Rosebud Graphic Classics**, **Expo 2001**, and the New Zealand anthologies **Officer Pup** and **Roundabout**). And waiting for me to get around to them are a web project for kids (ultimately to be collected, we hope) called **Swifty and the Box from Beyond**, written by the long-suffering and extremely patient Scott Gray; and a collaboration with writer John Arcudi called **Bananas McGurk**, about a talking gorilla in 1900s New York. I wouldn't hold my breath for either of these unless **Fred the Clown** starts to make enough money that I can cut back on the illustration work, so feel free to take that as a hint...

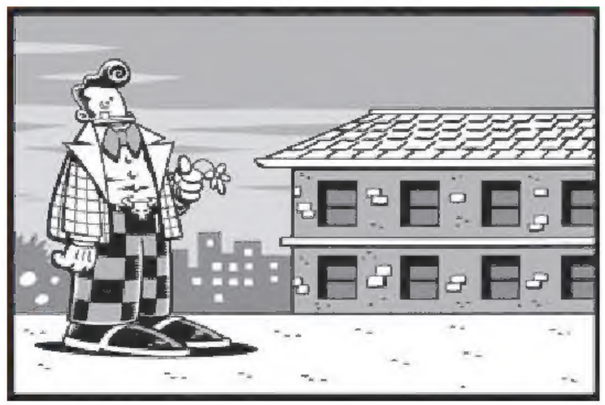
Roger Langridge

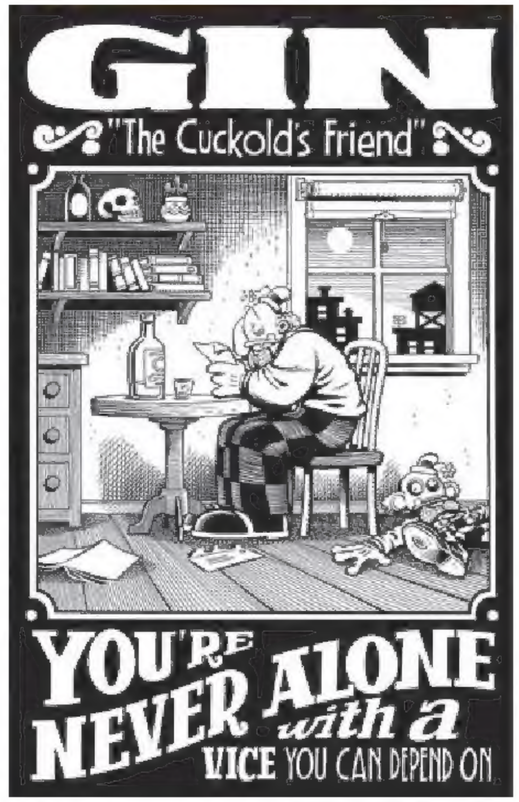
Click on Globe returns to contents





The selected Roger Langridge:
Page 1: Sketches – *Sebastion* (centre) and *Mugwhump* (right); large illo is called *Pub Anagrams*.
Page 2: Dr Who? Hartnell, Troughton and a couple of Tom Baker, plus an illustration in celebration of the Goon Show (1950s insanity from Peter Sellars, Spike Milligan, Harry Secombe and Michael Bentine).
Page 3: The Fred collection, all self-titled apart from above right: the cover to Fred the Clown #2 (Buy it - that's an order!), *Saturday Night Fred* (below this) *Fred at the Beach* (right of this) and *Fred on the bottle* (far right of this). **BL**





Click on Globe returns to contents

WORLD OF HEROS

Chris Spicer & Rebecca Bonser's made up comics news...

Marmoset Madness At Marvel

MARVEL has announced that March will be Marvel's Marvellous Marmoset Madness Month! All the comics solicited by Marvel that month will linked by the common theme of marmosets, and the crossover will be bookended by two one-off specials which will lead into the introduction to the Marvel Universe of "the most exciting new comic character in years."

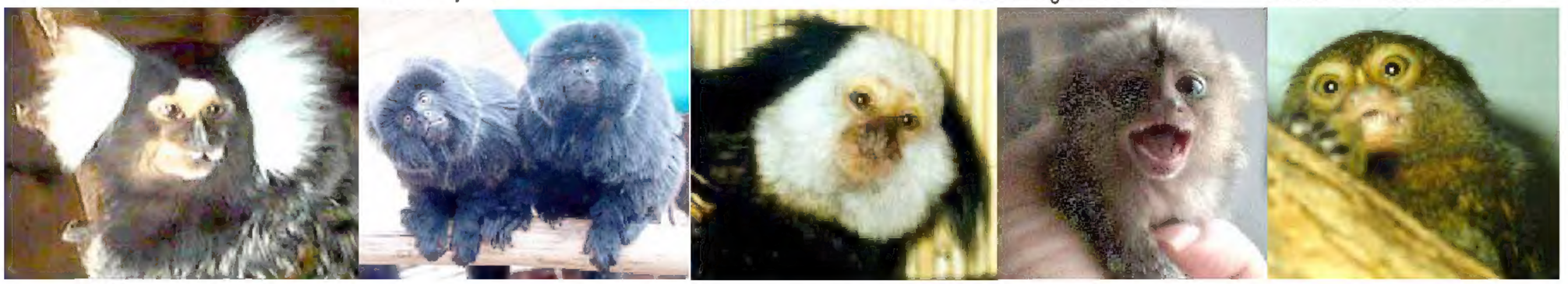
"It's gonna be great!", said Editor In Chief Joe Quesada at a recent press conference. "All the comics that month are gonna have marmosets bursting out of the pages! We'll have marmosets here, marmosets there, marmosets everywhere! Marmosets marmosets marmosets!" When pressed for details about the comics content, Quesada cried "Marmosets, I tell you!" and then ducked behind the podium, refusing to come out again until everyone else had left.

We have very few details of the two one-off specials. The first, Marvel Universe: The Coming Of The Marmosets, will set the stage for the marmoset invasion, while the second, which will condude the storyline, is to be titled Marvel Universe: The Going Of The Marmosets. Both will centre mainly on marmosets.

This will lead directly into a new ongoing series, which will feature a brand new character - the revolutionary Marmoset Man! A young, nerdy scientist, Dirk Dickenson, is bitten by a radioactive marmoset during an experiment gone wrong. When his parents are killed, he's granted the use of a magical power ring and gains access to a secret super-soldier formula. Injured in an accident, he is forced to construct an armoured suit to provide him with life support, but the suit causes him to mutate into a shambling green monster. A serious allergic reaction to an alien meteorite containing the rare element Craptonite causes his body to join with a nearby Swiss army knife, which coats his skeleton in metal and grants him utility claws and the ability to control the weather. He accepts wardship of a young acrobat whose parents were paralysed and who, having been shipwrecked on a desert island and forced to hunt for food using no more than a home-made bow and arrow, learns the art of swinging through trees by the tail grafted onto him by a mad scientist experimenting with dinosaur DNA aboard an alien spaceship. He soon becomes Marmoset Man's teen sidekick, Lemur Boy. The rest of the first issue will tell the tale of their early adventures together, fighting the villanous Two-Nose.

The character was created by Joe Quesada himself, after an extraordinarily long board meeting where copious amounts of purple vodka jelly and the flesh of the giant aquatic Brazilian centipede were consumed. The idea has been variously described as "inspired," "brilliant", and "sheer fucking lunacy", although the final opinion was our own. As with all comics that should never really have happened, we expect this one to do big things.

We asked Marvel's Head of Public Relations, Avi Arad, for a comment. Unfortunately, he was too busy plotting ways to kill comic fans via an electrical surge through the Internet to talk to us.



Left: some of the stars of the new Marvel blockbuster!

Wildstorm Launch Fails To Get Off The Ground

Wildstorm's launch celebrations for their new Eye of The Storm imprint failed to take off recently - literally!!! The company had arranged for a flypast by a light aircraft trailing a banner featuring the name of the new line, but unfortunately the plane was unable to take off - due to the banner being too heavy!

Pilot Jimmy Connors (no relation) told us, "Normally this wouldn't have posed a problem, but their banner was just too big. A few words shorter and I could have taken off, but asking to trail that many words was just ludicrous. Whatever happened to sensible names for comics publishers, like Marvel, Image or Egmont Fleetway Editions?"

A spokesperson for DC admitted that the pilot had a point. He would not confirm whether this would affect the publishing of DC's forthcoming Green Lantern/Green Arrow: Emerald Adventures - The Return To The City Of The Robot Monsters From the Planet Arcturus Alpha Prime.

Spawn-Ing Ecological Disaster

Scandal rocked the world of comics recently, when famous creator Todd McFarlane was implicated in a potential ecological disaster. The scandal arose after a group of teenage males were found on their high school playground with a large industrial drill and a tanker of liquid nitrogen. When confronted with these items by the authorities, they revealed that they had recently chatted online with McFarlane, who had stated that he would only return to drawing his popular *Spawn* title "when Hell freezes over".

McFarlane has denied responsibility, and instead blamed computer games, martial arts movies, *Pokemon*, role-playing and rock'n'roll. When asked if blame could also be attributed to violent comics, he responded with "Of course it can, you idiot!" before slapping his hands over his mouth and looking embarrassed. He went on to deny that his comics were violent, and threatened to gut anyone who said otherwise. Here at *World of Heros*, we would just like to say what a tremendously talented creator McFarlane is, and a nice guy to boot, although we will obviously be moving homes shortly.

The teenagers recently appeared in court where, under the strict American law system, they were sentenced to death. This was later reduced to bed without supper. BL

Click on Globe returns to contents

HOLD THE BACK PAGE

Your comments and letters

Kelvin Green
kelvingreen@comicartist.com

Excellent editorial - and interesting viewpoint on September 11, which I don't think I've seen before thus far.

Jenni Cole's article - sensible and funny, I liked it a lot. Although the idea of Cap'n Yankee being a good character was a strange viewpoint...

Carol Close's *Issues* was very thought-provoking. Tom Lennon's article was funny! Did the acid-house movement really get their symbol from Watchmen? I thought it existed a long time before that... Nice joke/BSP about the small-press bus driver! The FF article was a nice little page-filler. I was wondering how that huge team of creators actually worked.

Was this month's *Miffy* a dig at Brian Michael Bendis' style? Mike Carey interview – fascinating, but he's a scary-looking bugger! Fabian Nicieza – VERY interesting.

The D'Israeli article was strange to read. I'm not sure why. The second page seemed to repeat the first, and the first had a very odd style. Hmm...

Overall, a decent issue. Mike Kidson was missed, but on the whole, this was a more interesting issue for me than any previous one. I must say that it didn't look as good as previous issues - there was a sparse feeling to it, but I really can't say why I think that. I think that it might have been down to the graphics used. Whereas before, the pictures used have been "cut out" from their sources, most of the pictures this issue were straight scans from comic covers. What that led to was a feeling that there was a lot to read (I agree, it wasn't sparse in that sense), but not much to look at. So, sparse.

Brian Jacks
slush@slushfactory.com

Hey guys, just wanted to say excellent work. This is just what a comic magazine should be. Borderline is the first thing over ten pages that I've actually been able to read on a computer monitor without gouging out my eyes.

Steve Murley
stevie@murley.fsnet.co.uk

I've been impressed, more with the schedule keeping than by the actual look of Borderline – it doesn't really have a lot to beat in terms of appearance, even Wizard isn't as easy on the eye as one expects.

I'm thinking that you guys are becoming indispensible and that makes me wonder if you can continue to carry on with this thing with such an obvious lack of funding?

Phil says: First up, Borderline is different from most comic magazines. I suppose it could be construed as damning with faint praise, but we've been called "The Comics Journal Lite", which I don't think is too bad a description, albeit maybe a little misleading. Face it, we're covering stuff that TCJ would cover, but we're also not forgetting two crucial areas: US mainstream superhero comics and *world comics. We're hoping that for every one of the superhero junkies out there we'll maybe turn them onto something they wouldn't ordinarily have even thought about reading. And vice versa!*

But that isn't really answering your question, is it? It's true to say that no one gets paid for doing this. The little income we've generated from advertising has been swallowed up by the physical costs of production alone and our dedicated team of comics fans, aficionados and experts continue to turn in first rate work for nothing.

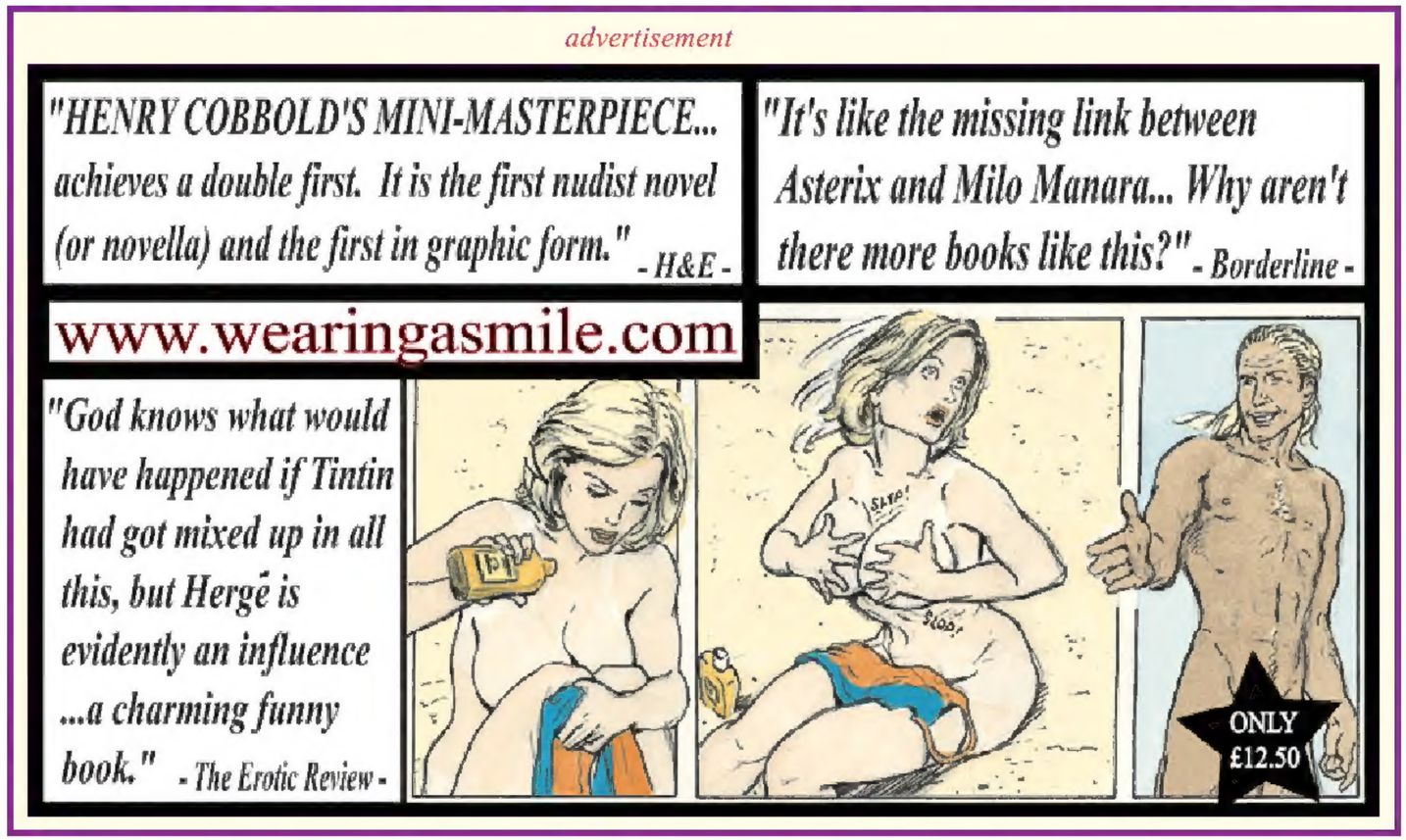
Why don't more publishers advertise? Well, to be fair, we're neither fish nor fowl – what do the publishers classify us as? A comics magazine or an Internet site? Borderline as a concept isn't new, but the concept and technology is still relatively frowned upon or treated with mistrust. There are numerous individuals out there in fandom who flatly refuse to even look at the magazine because it should *be a website, and PDF is a crap format. While others refuse to accept that we're going for as much a design as a dissemination ethic. Some people couldn't give a fig what something looks like and I have no problems with people who prefer content over style (just so long as they approach the subject with an open mind).*

But I'm doing a Peter David again. Borderline's existence isn't under threat. We all have full-time jobs and manage to get this baby out every month on the dot. It's hard and sometimes we feel as though we're doing too much, especially when the choice of social life versus sacrifice comes along. We know that the chances of getting industry advertising are pretty slim. Marvel has no budget; DC has no real understanding of what we are, the indies have no money and the rest have no manners. But at least we have a definable reason why publishers don't advertise and that is at the moment we are an unknown quantity – I've worked at some places where the publishers simply wouldn't advertise because they didn't like the man publishing the magazine. We don't have the same problem!

The excellent thing was that faced with the threat of at least a few more months of doing this for nothing, not one of our team said "I can't do this anymore". Hey, we all love comics!

What started as a slightly altruistic secondary reason for producing Borderline has now become a more broad target. We no longer just have to educate the readers, we have to *educate the publishers and make them aware of the future and get them out of living in the past.* BL

advertisement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